

Catherine Linden

Lover's Moon

[image]

Goddess of the Night

He drew her to him and held her close and for a moment they stood like that, her head against his chest, his fingers lightly stroking her hair, his cheek resting against the top of her head. Luc felt the erratic beating of Keira's heart, the way she trembled, and he realized with a pang that for Keira too this was a turning point from which she would never be able to go back.

Pointing to the moon, Luc said, "To the Indians she is the Night Goddess. And sometimes, like now, she discreetly pulls a veil over her face to give earth lovers the gift of privacy."

Keira looked at the moon, then at him, and by some magic alchemy they were drawn together, then down to the thick bed of aromatic pine needles at their feet, and their lips met joyously, triumphantly, for each in their own way had fought a battle to reach this moment and now they would savor it to the full.

Dedication

*For my nephews and niece,
Billy, Steven and Lesley Lynch,
with my love.*

A LEISURE BOOK ®

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You are Love, you are Light,
Elusive as the wind,
From darkness we reach
And fall,
And falling, know your measure.
You are love. . . .

BETRAYAL

1

Strathvagan, Scotland
February 2, 1808

In the valley the people slept on, mercifully unaware that catastrophe was about to strike them, that life as they knew it was coming to an end. Afterwards, long afterwards, Keira MacKenzie wondered if she'd had a premonition of what was to come the previous evening as the family sat around the peat fire listening to Granny Beth making music on her treasured harmonica.

Keira had been struck that night by the beauty of her loved ones' faces in the flickering firelight, beauty she had never noticed before. In vivid clarity she saw the gnarled, blue-veined hand of her grandmother holding the harmonica to her lips, the amazingly clear eyes of her father gazing contentedly into the flames now that the day's work was done, and the tender smile touching her mother's lips

as she cradled her youngest on her lap, her cheek against his curly golden hair.

Unexpectedly, a lump swelled in Keira's throat. She

thought: Life may be hard in the Highlands, but still we are happy. We can be happy with nothing as long as we have each other.

Keira was to remember her family that way, all together by the fire.

Before dawn the following morning the posse gathered at Strathvagan Castle. The Laird of Strathvagan watched them from an upstairs bedchamber window. He was very nervous now that the time had come, suddenly gripped by last-minute doubts. But it hadn't been a hasty decision. It had taken weeks of thought and careful consideration before he had finally made up his mind, a painful, difficult time for him, so upsetting that he had actually become ill. While he pondered alone in his study an image of his stern-faced father a man he had always been afraid of had constantly loomed before him. The eyes of the old earl had blazed with accusation, and something he had once said to Strathvagan boomed back to him from the past. "A chief is like a father and the clan his children. When *your* time comes to be the chief, don't ever fail them, my son, or the weight of a thousand years of history will crash down about your ears. We are linked, you see, one to the other. That is our heritage, our destiny."

Gazing down into the torchlit courtyard from his window, Strathvagan quailed inwardly at what he had set in motion. In effect he had lifted a sword and was about to bring it down, severing his connection to his clan and with it a bond that had united them from time immemorial. Ah, but everything had changed since his father's time! The old ways had become obsolete. Surely a man had a right to try to make his lands prosper, he fretted, reminding himself that other chiefs had already taken the step towards progress while he continued to lag behind out of concern

for the welfare of his people!

But his first obligation was to his *own* family, a large family that made many demands on his purse. His heir, Lord Mathew, was a man now and filled with the single-minded impatience of youth. *He* had no scruples about doing what required to be done, but then Mathew epitomized the new breed of Highland nobleman, mostly absentee landlords who had long since lost contact with their clans or any

sentimental feelings about them. Mathew had practically sneered at his father's misgivings and promptly offered to head the mission in his stead and, God help him, Strathvagan had let him. Coward! the earl castigated himself as he stood in the darkness of the window. Then he turned his head and looked down into the valley where his people still slept.

The posse left the castle at dawn, when the deep glens of the Scottish Highlands were still locked in darkness and uncertain gray light curled tentative fingers over the crests of the mountains. Behind them, on its high granite plateau, the Castle of Strathvagan loomed black against the paling sky, glowering down upon the small hamlets and townships nestled far below, as it had done for over six hundred years. There was an inch or two of snow on the ground and the morning was bitterly cold, the flint-hard ground sending sparks flying from the horses' hoofs and smoky plumes from their nostrils. The posse rode on in silence through the semidarkness, flaring torches held aloft to light the way. Though Lord Mathew was ostensibly their leader, the man who was *really* in charge was Murdoch Ross, the earl's chief tacksman and also his cousin.

Ross was a portly man in his early fifties, gruff but kindly by nature, and he would have given much to have been a hundred leagues away from Strathvagan that morning. Like some of the other riders, he was

privately opposed to the proceedings but was compelled to hold his tongue out of expediency. Though related to the chief, Ross was also kin to many of the clan he was about to evict from their homes in the name of progress. He could have refused, but that would have spelled personal disaster, and in the new way of things it was every man for himself.

In a black depression, his bones creaking in the cold, Ross wished he had emigrated to the New World with another branch of his family when they'd left the previous year. He had no taste for this! His mind balked as they neared the village of Radmuir and he thought of the people there lying snug and innocent in their beds, never dreaming that their chief was about to betray them.

Seventeen-year-old Keira MacKenzie awoke suddenly to the sound of hoofbeats thundering down the glen from the direction of Strathvagan Castle. It was pitch black and icy cold inside the tiny one-room cottage where seven members of the MacKenzie family lived, and where their ancestors had lived before them. There wasn't a sound as

the family slept on.

Automatically, as she did every morning, Keira glanced at the hearth and was glad to see the faintest tinge of red among the peat banked up there, waiting to be fanned to vigorous life in the morning. She was in charge of gathering and chopping the fire kindling and cutting the peat, and making sure that the fire was tamped down properly to a low smolder, ready to flare up when the family arose for breakfast. Tending the fire was only one of her many duties as the eldest of Lizzie and Callam MacKenzie's four living children. Sometimes she grew weary of the heavy drudgery and the dull routine and in an obscure way longed for something better something different and exciting but for a girl in her position nothing else was

possible. Soon, in another year, she would wed her laird, the miller's son, and settle down to a life very similar to her mother's but at least she would never want for bread to eat! Tam, her young man, was always covered in flour and always smelled of dough and yeast.

Sighing, Keira turned her head away from the fire and cocked an ear to the narrow slitted window, wondering if she had imagined the sound of riders approaching Radmuir. She hadn't. And they were closer now.

She sat up on the pallet she shared with her younger sister, puzzled that they should have visitors at such an early hour. The girl started violently when an orange glow, like a bonfire, shone through the slatted windows, filling the interior of the cottage with an eerie light.

"Pa!" she cried, looking down the room to where her parents slept behind a curtained recess. "Wake up, Pa! There's riders come from the castle."

Callam MacKenzie tumbled out of bed and ran to the nearest window, threw back the shutters and peered out. After one startled glance he murmured, "In the name of fortune, what's happening? It looks like Murdoch Ross and his crew, though a canna be rightly sure in the dark . . ."

The entire family jumped up and crowded about the windows. It was Keira's fifteen-year-old brother Gavin who uttered the first words of foreboding.

"Something's badly wrong, Pa," the youth whispered. "Why else would they come wi' guns and torches as if hunting for cattle thieves? You

don't think" The boy swallowed and couldn't go on.

In the red glow filtering through the windows the MacKenzie family looked at each other, their eyes filled with sudden dread, the same chilling thought in each of their minds. "Get the dirks," Callam Mac-

Kenzie ordered tensely.

For some time now the Highland valleys had been rumbling with awful tidings about chiefs turning against their own clans and clearing people off their property, leaving them homeless and destitute with nowhere to go. It was true that things had changed following the battle of Culloden when the Highland lords had lost their right to rule their people as they saw fit, or to recruit them to fight their wars against other clans and outsiders. Subsequently, the chieftains and the people had grown apart with the lessening of personal contact.

The people of Radmuir rarely saw the present earl or his family since they spent most of their time in Edinburgh and London, the chief content to leave the management of his vast Highland estates in the hands of factors and agents. Radmuir saw even less of the heir, Lord Mathew. Mathew had been educated and raised mostly in the south, and to the chagrin of the clan spoke more like an Englishman than a Scotsman. Despite all these things the clan remained staunchly loyal to their hereditary chief and quickly made excuses for his shortcomings.

He didn't come among them much, they said, because he was basically a shy, retiring fellow who disliked being fussed over. And the reason he spent most of his time in the cities was because the climate there was more congenial to his delicate health. If he sometimes rack-rented them this was hardest to excuse well, even a great noble occasionally suffered an embarrassment of funds and was forced to turn to his own for help. Many were the clansmen who had engaged in battle when the name of Strathvagan was slurred!

The posse halted in the small village square and a shot was fired to summons the people. Keira's father and other men of Radmuir rushed out to meet them,

the women and children following in their wake, all shivering in the frosty air. They found a detachment of thirty of the chief's commissioners milling about the yard, bundled up in heavy cloaks that flapped about them in the wind that swept down from the

mountains, pitch-tipped fagots hissing in their hands. All were armed.

With a start of surprise Keira noticed Lord Mathew among them. At sight of the twenty-year-old nobleman the men bowed their heads and the women curtsied respectfully. The heir was tall and exceedingly lean, with a long pale face and prominent nose. Mathew was one of the most sought-after catches in Britain, thanks to the enormous fortune he would inherit one day, and he was very conscious of his worth and position. He acknowledged their obeisance with a curt nod.

Inwardly, the young man felt his confidence waning at the sight of all these people converging on them from all sides, though he strove to conceal it beneath a haughty exterior. From his saddle he gazed down at the clansmen, big, hard-muscled men with a directness in their eyes that he found daunting. Without waiting for leave to speak, one of them demanded boldly of the tacksman, "Well, what's ado then, Ross? The rents are not due for another week."

While Ross replied that he hadn't come about the rents, Mathew studied the people, all strangers to him, and he recalled his father once commenting about them, "They may bow to you and doff their caps, but never for a moment think that they are humble. Pride and arrogance have been bred into them through the centuries, and they call no man master not even us! They think of us as family, Mathew, and *that* is why they accord us special respect. Never forget that they hail from a warrior past, and I assure you that they make much better friends than enemies."

When Ross looked at him questioningly, indicating that he should break the unpalatable news, Mathew muttered gruffly that the tacksman should do so in his stead, giving the excuse that they knew Ross better and might accept it more readily coming from him.

The older man blanched. "But"

"Proceed!" Mathew snapped. "Have done with it."

Ross steeled himself and faced the people.

"By the authority invested in me by the Earl of Strathvagan, I've come to serve notice on you and the other townships that you must quit his lordship's property by noon tomorrow. The earl has generously agreed to allow you to relocate on some land he owns on the seacoast near Caithness. However" the tacksman was sweating profusely in spite of the cold "the land on the coast is poor and not suitable for crops, so

you would have to make a living from fishing. He would strongly advise you to take ship for British North America instead," Ross continued doggedly, frequently wiping his streaming brow with a cloth. "Over there you will find good acres aplenty and for the taking, and will never have to pay rent to anyone again."

This was met with a profound silence.

The people of Radmuir simply could not take it in. Quit the Earl of Strathvagan's estates where their ancestors had lived for centuries! Move to the storm-blasted cliffs of Caithness where even a seabird could hardly find sustenance! Take up fishing when they were farmers! Or even *more* incomprehensible, emigrate to the wilds of the New World thousands of miles from their homeland, there to live amongst vicious beasts and savages!

The crowd gaped up at Ross open-mouthed, then Callam MacKenzie burst out laughing. "Och, awa wi' ye, man! What kind of nonsense is this? We *belong* here, and well you know it. Aye"his eyes flicked to

Lord Mathew"every bit as much as the chief himself."

Grimly, the members of the posse stared back at him, and once more it was left to the flustered Ross to reply. "You have no title to this property, MacKenzie"

"No words on paper, mayhap," Keira's father broke in, "but our blood nourished this ground we are standing on, and our brawn fought the gentry's battles when in the past we were called into service." His expression became grim as he went on loudly, "And never forget that it was us who worked the land to feed them in that grand hoose up yonder." He made a punching motion with his fist in the direction of the castle. "The sweat of oor backs ensured that they lived in comfort and style, aye, even when we went hungry. Surely that means more than fancy words on paper!"

Sadly, it didn't.

"Now look here and try to understand," Murdoch Ross plowed on, feeling that the clan was owed at least some sort of explanation. "This land isn't profitable as it stands now, and the owner has the right to try to make his estates pay. His Lordship plans to put the land under sheep. Not the type we have now," he hastened to add, "but a bigger, stronger breed by the name of Cheviot, famed for their mutton and wool"

"Sheep!" Keira cried in astonishment. "He would drive us out to make way for sheep?"

"Aye," her father nodded bitterly, "sheep, of course, will bring him more money than we ever willevan though he already has more siller than he kens what to do with!" MacKenzie insolently turned his back on the posse to face the crowd and shouted angrily, "His Lordship cares nothing for us. Nothing! Finally we ken the cut of his cloth!"

"See here, fellow . . ." Lord Mathew came forward

at last, his noble blood boiling at the slight to his father's honor, and nervous as he was, he was still duty-bound to defend his sire. But his words were drowned out in the great communal cry of anguish and heartbreak that burst from the throats of the clan as they stood in despair with tears running down their cheeks, the truth finally dawning on them that their chief had abandoned them and fully meant to turn them out, all in the name of profit.

It took Murdoch Ross some time to calm them so that Mathew could speak, but the moment the heir opened his mouth it proved to be a dreadful mistake. Mathew spoke with the nasal twang of their ancient enemy south of the border, and their sorrow quickly turned to anger. Hardly had he started than one of the women remarked, "Listen to him! He's no' one of us. He may order the English about but he'll no' order us!"

"Turncoat!" another shouted. "And his faither, the laird, is a traitor. We spit on the Lords of Strathvagan and curse them to hell."

Then came the cry, "Stone them! We won't be driven off our land to make room for sheep. Stone them, stone them!"

It was the women who urged their men into battle, as they had done for centuries. While the men rushed back to their barns and sheds for pitchforks and dirks and the antique claymores that hadn't seen use since Culloden, the women pelted the riders with stones and frozen clods of peat and anything else that could be used as a weapon.

Keira glanced about her in consternation at the violence in the square, shocked at the sight of her normally gentle mother baying like a she-wolf while bombarding the posse with sticks from a pile of firewood. Even her old grandmother, a woman of eighty, was shrieking and shaking her fist at them.

The girl was stunned. Never had she seen the women behaving like this. Of course, she'd heard the stories of warrior Highland women going into battle alongside husbands and sons in days gone by, but to witness it for herself unnerved Keira. She had always considered herself courageous. There was the time, for instance, when she had climbed into a flaming byre to pull a neighbor lad to safety, and on another occasion she had jumped into a snow-filled gully to retrieve a new-born lamb. All her instincts were humanitarian, geared towards helping rather than hurting others. Now all about her was the ghastly spectacle of kin fighting kin, since so many in the posse were related to the townsfolk in one way or another.

Keira's mother flew over and thrust a heavy piece of wood into her hand. Catching the dazed expression on the girl's face, Lizzie MacKenzie gave her a shake. "Dinna just stand there gawking, for the love of might!" she cried. "If they drive us oot we'll be finished. We've got to fight for what's ours."

Keira glanced at the stick she had been given, then into her mother's face, only now that dear face was horribly distorted with desperation and fury. It was like looking at a stranger.

"Ma . . . II . . . these are our people too"

"No more! Traitors they are, and so they will be treated." Her mother gave her a shove, urging, "Let them have it, lass. We need a' the help we can get."

The world about them had gone mad! Surely, Keira told herself, it was a nightmare and soon she would wake up and the hideous conflict going on around her would mercifully melt away, or, failing that, it was all a dreadful misunderstanding. There was simply no way that the laird would make them leave! The earls of Strathvagan and their clan had always lived here happily together, each helping the other. "Stop!" the

distracted girl suddenly screamed. "Have you all lost your senses?"

Nobody heard her or paid the slightest attention, and as Keira stood trembling with tears coursing down her cheeks, the stick her mother had given her dangling from her hand, her father and the other men came surging back from the barns in a determined wave, each with a weapon in his hand.

The battle began in earnest then, blood-curdling howls and the clash

of steel reverberating off the surrounding mountains, and the blood of the clansmen once more spilled onto the frozen ground as it had done so often in the past. Only this time there was a difference; this time they were fighting members of their own clan.

Keira, frozen in horror, hardly noticed when something struck the side of her head. The square was now a roiling mass of struggling bodies, and one of the barns and several houses were burning. Standing mute, the girl was kicked and shoved and driven back to the door of her father's byre. She could do nothing. Words wouldn't come, her limbs had become paralyzed, and there was a glassy stare in her eyes. She could no longer see her parents in the mass of struggling villagers, and where were her grandmother and the wee ones?

Lord Mathew shouted in terror as the clan drew closer to his horse. "Drive them back, you dratted idiots," he yelled to his henchmen as they halfheartedly strove to keep the villagers at bay. "Suppress this riot or you'll answer to my father! Why in the name of God are you hesitating?"

"Have mercy," Murdoch Ross appealed to him. "We can find another way"

"Mercy!" Mathew roared back. "There will be no mercy for *you*, Ross, if this insurrection isn't put down and His Lordship's orders obeyed."

His threat spurred the posse to positive action. A shot rang out, and Callam MacKenzie was the first to fall. The people of Radmuir fought mightily in a mixture of anguish and fury, but they were poorly armed and had the disadvantage of being on foot while their opponents were on horseback. Urged on by Lord Mathew, they plunged in amongst the clan and ruthlessly drove them back, mowing down men, women and children in their path, angered finally when the people refused to give up, even though by now it was obvious that they couldn't win.

Flushed with triumph, his confidence restored, Lord Mathew spied a girl standing apart from the others by the sagging door of an old tumbledown barn. For an instant she didn't seem real, so still was she amid the tumult seething around her. She was like a statue, dressed in a long white sarklike night garment that rose in twin peaks over her chest, with hip-long russet hair that tumbled past her waist. Her eyes were fixed, her expression stricken.

She was in shock. Mathew saw that at once. A thin trickle of blood ran from a wound on her forehead, but she seemed oblivious to it and to

him, and he prodded his horse forward to within six feet of where she stood. Behind her, as if beckoning to him, the barn door sagged wide on its leather hinge.

The young nobleman sprang off his horse, seized the girl roughly by the arm and all but hurled her into the darkness of the barn, where she sprawled headlong on the hard-packed dirt floor, the sudden violence taking her breath away. But it snapped her out of her trance and she began to gasp, then gulp in great, sobbing lungfuls of air. Struggling to her feet, she forced out a weak cry, then a scream, but in the chaos going on outside nobody heard her.

Using his torch as a prod, Mathew drove her back into the deep recesses of the building and shoved her

down on a pile of straw. He stepped back and looked at her keenly.

He found her delicate beauty startling and blurted, "Had I known that the wenches were so sweet up here I would have returned to the Highlands long since."

" 'Tis a pity you ever returned at all!"

To speak to him like that! Such insolence from a common serf!

He set the torch on a high stone ledge and his hands dropped to his belt. Slowly, smiling at her, he unbuttoned his breeches.

Tense as a trapped animal, Keira watched his every movement, well aware of what he meant to do. Too late, she realized that her mother had been right. This was no temporary madness, or bad dream. The Laird and his family were out to destroy them, to take away everything they had and cast them out destitute into the snow.

Watching the girl warily as she crouched in the straw, Mathew dropped his breeches.

"Scum!" Keira spat at him, her gray eyes disdainful.

Yet she made no move to escape. Not that she could, of course, since he blocked the path to the door. Still, he would have thought she might try . . .

The young nobleman made a grave mistake then. He took her lack of resistance to mean that secretly she might not be averse to his

attentions, for all her insolent remarks. It had always been his experience that the lower order felt privileged to unite with the aristocracy, and obviously this wench was no exception. He had no way of knowing that Keira was only biding her time. Had he spent more time in the Highlands he would have learned that the clan never went anywhere without carrying a weapon concealed on their person, not even to the privy behind the house. Reivers and cattle thieves roamed the mountains, and wildcats and the occasional wolf could still

be seen. It was a foolish man or woman who ventured abroad unprepared.

Breathing hard, his eyes glazed with lust, Mathew threw himself on top of her, but he had only managed to get the luscious fullness of her breast in his hand and started to lower his mouth to it when he felt the fiery pain lance through his upper arm. Gasping, he went rigid and closed his eyes in agony, and when next he opened them he was alone in the barn.

2

Not only were the people of Radmuir cleared from the Earl of Strathvagan's land, they were proclaimed to be outlaws as well for rising up against him. Keira's father was shot to death in the village square. Her elderly grandmother had a fatal heart attack when she watched the entire village go up in flames, everything they owned destroyed. The clan left eight dead in Radmuir when they grabbed what little they could before being driven into the mountains, there to be hunted like animals in the dark glens; many froze or died of starvation.

On the third day Keira stood at the mouth of the cave where they had taken refuge and gazed off into the distance to the spot where Radmuir had once stood. The village was no more. All that could be seen was a smoldering pile of rubble to mark the place where her people had lived for more than five hundred years.

"Devils!" she grated between clenched teeth. "Traitors!"

She was a changed girl. Instead of merely wounding Lord Mathew in the barn, she wished fervently that she had killed him now as he had caused her father to be killed and her grandmother to die of

heartbreak. Why hadn't she fought them more determinedly? she asked herself over and over. Why had she hesitated? It was just that she had been so unprepared for what had happened, never dreaming that their own chief would desert them and cut them down.

Never again would she be so trusting! Never again would she hesitate to fight for what she felt to be right, or take it for granted that others would act for the common good in a just and honorable manner. There was no justice in the world, and little honor when a man could put *sheep* ahead of his own kind!

"Don't look back, lass," her brother Gavin said softly, appearing at Keira's side. "There's no going back for us now."

Tears ran down her cheeks. "Oh, Gavin, I never thought it could be like this."

"None of us did. Except for the odd cattle raid and skirmish with other clans, it has been peaceful in the valleys for a long time."

That was true. And it had made them complacent! Keira thought ruefully, her mournful eyes on the river that wound through the hills like a ribbon of cold silver. Here eagles soared in the summer, thick carpets of wildflowers covered the slopes, and trout, pike and salmon frolicked in the lochs. The cottage gardens bloomed bright and aromatic in the spring and summer, and the gentle lowing of cattle filled the sweet air. Even in the winter the clan had been snug and protected in their tiny valley homes, clustered around roaring peat fires when the day's work was done.

"The beauty has all gone away," Keira choked.

Gavin, a lanky lad with freckles and a mop of shaggy reddish hair, smiled sardonically. "It wasn't *always* beautiful, Keira, though it's nice to remember it that way. Mind when the potato crops failed and we had nothing to eat but the dog?"

She nodded, well recalling the desperate day when her father had been forced to kill their collie, sobs choking him while he did it.

"And the time the fever killed half the village?"

"Aye," the girl nodded, "that was dreadful."

"And the back-breaking work that was never over"

"Gavin . . ." Keira turned to face him and gave him a searching look. "Are you trying to make me feel better or worse? Worse, I think, from all the bad memories you are stirring. Wheest, lad, I ken fine that Radmuir wasn't paradise but it was our hame!"

"Maybe." His narrow face sobered and anger sparked in his eyes. "But more than ours it was *his*, Keira! He alone had title to it, and it's the high-flown words on paper that count in the end."

Keira was never to forget that.

She clutched her brother's hand. "What's going to happen to us, Gavin? I dinna think I can survive another night in the open, nor can they," she whispered, nodding deeper into the cave where the twenty members of the clan still with them huddled in a tight circle sharing the few rag rugs and blankets and the little food they had been able to seize before their homes had been torched.

The day after they had left Radmuir the villagers had split into three groups, reasoning that they would stand a better chance of evading capture that way. A man in Keira's group then suggested they make for Helmsdale, where they might be able to find work at the port, or even on the fishing boats. Since nobody could think of a better idea, they set off in the general

direction of Helmsdale, but a solid wall of mountains stood between them and the coast, miles of rugged terrain, a daunting prospect even for the fittest.

The clan were not fit. They had hardly eaten anything since they had left home, and by now the bitter cold was taking its toll. Even worse, all the fight seemed to have gone out of them and they had become silent and apathetic and thoroughly demoralized, suffering from a disease endemic to all displaced people, the inability to care *what* happened to them.

"Look at Ma," Keira said worriedly. "She keeps muttering to herself but she won't speak to us, nor to any of the others. Oh, Gavin, I'm so afeared!"

He squeezed her hand. "At least we don't have snow like we usually do by this time of the year, and that's a blessing, Keira."

Impulsively, she stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. "You'd find some good even in hell, brother."

But the dreaded heavy snow stole upon them two nights later while they slept in an abandoned shepherd's hut, all cuddled together for warmth. When they awoke to the ominous white glare outside they found two people missing from the group, Lizzie MacKenzie and her youngest child wee Jimmy, just three years old. They were found lying outside under a mound of snow, the mother lying with the child in her arms. Both were frozen solid.

They were buried under a stone cairn, the first of many. By the time the remnants of the clan reached Helmsdale, they had left a string of such cairns to mark their passage. Only thirteen out of the original twenty made it safely to the coast, and even they were more dead than alive only to find the port town bulging with other displaced clans like themselves.

The notorious land clearances were taking place all over the Highlands of Scotland, they found, not just in the valley of Strathvagan. The latest grand scheme to

reach the Highlands was Cheviot sheep; through them, the landowners were assured, fortunes were to be made. Some of the landed gentry, those more caring and compassionate, held out for a long time, but in the end the temptation proved too great for most to resist.

The harbor was packed with newcomers desperate to find work, many so hungry that they agreed to payment in slops. Nightly and early each morning starving bands scavenged the area around the sheds where the fish were auctioned off, snarling and fighting like packs of wild dogs over rotten herring and entrails. At dawn every morning skeletal bodies were found dead in the street, many of them children. Crime was rampant as more and more people were driven to steal food, or items that could be quickly sold to buy food, and a pall of hopelessness and dejection hung over everything.

"We're finished, then," one of their group announced after they had stood in a long line hoping to be signed on with one of the fishing boats, only to be told that there were no jobs left. By then they had been three days in Helmsdale, living on whatever edible rubbish they could find, and had stood in many similar lines, all for naught.

Gavin MacKenzie had a wild idea. Pointing down the dock to where an emigrant ship was berthed, he suggested, "We could try to sneak aboard that boat yonder. I heard a seaman say that it's bound for the New World."

The other men gaped at him, aghast. He might as well have suggested they embark for the moon. Until they arrived in Helmsdale, few of them had been very far from their village before, and, desperate as they were, they simply couldn't conceive of leaving their homeland.

When no one answered him, Gavin shouted angrily,

"Well, surely 'tis better than staying here and starving to death!" He waved his bony arms in agitation, looking like a scarecrow in his ragged clothes, his auburn hair frosted with snow and frozen up in peaks. "Where's your spirit, lads?" Suddenly the boy was weeping. "We've lost almost everything," he went on brokenly, "but we've still got our lives. We canna give up now."

But only eight of the younger ones followed Gavin and Keira when they went to reconnoiter the *Fleetwood*. They gazed up at the ship in awe, trying to decide how best they could slip on board once darkness fell. All gave a start when a bright-eyed little man popped out of a nearby shack and introduced himself as Wilbur Henshaw. Waving to a billboard plastered to the side of his shed, a placard advertising the merits and seaworthiness of the vessel in the most exaggerated terms, and stating the cost of passage in tiny print at the bottom, Henshaw inquired eagerly, "You wish to emigrate?"

They stared at him in silence and with the greatest suspicion, much as they viewed any stranger outside the valley of Strathvagan. Henshaw's keen gaze took in a group of pale, gaunt-faced beggars, most of them with dazed expressions in their eyes. He assessed their position in an instant. After all, there were hordes just like them in town, all milling about like zombies. He also sensed that they had only recently arrived, which was good.

Pointing at his shack, the little man remarked casually, "I was just boiling up a big pot of fish stew, some fine herring fresh off the boat this morning. But I'm afraid my eyes were too big for my belly and I've made far too much," he informed them with a rueful chuckle. "There's enough for an army in there and I do hate to waste food, so you'd be most welcome to help me consume it."

Ravenous as they were, they didn't move or say a word.

Ah, thought the ship's agent, the pride of the Highlander! They were fools!

"Of course, I would expect you to do a little work for me afterwards," he added cannily, anxious to get them safely inside his hut before somebody else came along to warn them off, somebody who knew more about the various "schemes" going on in Helmsdale.

That did it. They looked at each other, and, though nothing was actually said, some sort of silent communication went on between them. They followed him into the shack.

The first thing they saw and smelled was a great iron cauldron of bubbling stew simmering on a glowing stove, then they felt the delicious heat that immediately cracked the ice locking their bones. They fell upon the table that Henshaw indicated, slaving at the mouth in anticipation, tears coming to their eyes. Wordlessly they watched as the agent ladled out the food onto rusted tin plates and with a casual wave of a hand indicated that they should eat.

They didn't have to be told twice. Their host turned away, mildly disgusted, as they stuffed the meal into their mouths. He'd bought the fish cheap because it was slightly off, and the vegetables and potatoes had been moldy, the bread stalenot that they noticed. It might have been a banquet the way they were demolishing the food.

To cover the sound of munching, Henshaw apprised them of what was going on in the town. "The population here has swelled to fifty times its normal size," he said to the heads bent low over the table. "Most of the newcomers are clans who have been evicted by their chiefs. Shocking business!" He sniffed disapprovingly, though in actuality the actions of these very chieftains stood to make him rich. "There is no work

to be had in this town," he announced, searching the pale faces to get their reaction. "And the authorities are planning to force the new arrivals to move on, since they can't be adequately settled here. Helmsdale simply couldn't cope with so many, you see. The place is in chaos now."

Gavin lifted his head. "Where will we go?"

His host shrugged, sighing heavily. "The wise ones will go abroad; emigrate. There's nothing for them here. The gentry and those in power aim to keep them down"

"A curse on the gentry!" Gavin cried passionately. "We'll no' be mastered by the likes of *them* again."

Beside him, his sister nodded emphatically.

Henshaw examined the young pair with interest. They were the only ones in the group to show any spirit, any response. And they were handsome for all that they were clad in rags that hung about their thin frames in tatters, with thick auburn hair and clear gray eyes that were now filled with a terrible anger, so much so that the ship's agent felt the tiniest bit uneasy, remembering the fierce pride and strange arrogance of this breed, even though they had nothing. He had learned a lot about them and their habits, and suddenly wondered if they had dirks hidden about them somewhere.

"And what are your plans, if I may ask?" he queried politely, anxious to get to the crux of the matter so that he could get rid of them. It always made Henshaw, a very small man, feel at a distinct disadvantage to be surrounded by those much taller than himself, the more so when they were also half-savage, as these were.

Gavin swallowed the last of his food before answering. "We mean to take ship for the New World," he replied candidly.

"Indeed." Henshaw's brows rose. "And you have

the wherewithal to pay for your passage, I trust? I'm sure you must know that it isn't cheap?"

There was no response, but the brother and sister exchanged a furtive look that the agent interpreted correctly since so many before them had had the same idea. He leaned across the table confidently and warned, "Don't think of trying to stow away. The emigrant ships are guarded day and night, and anyone caught trying to sneak aboard is viciously thrashed and then chained up in the Tolbooth until they rot."

Again the MacKenzies exchanged a look, this time filled with dismay.

"However" Henshaw tapped Gavin on the arm "I do sympathize with your plight, and I happen to have a good friend among the seafaring gentlemen who might be able to help you. Captain Frew of the *Fleetwood* is a kindly, compassionate man. He has helped many others like yourselves. I'm delighted to be able to tell you that this true Christian gentleman has devised a way where by those without funds may still emigrate to the Americas, where a better life awaits them. Like Moses" Henshaw could hardly keep a straight face "he will, lead you to the Promised Land."

"Take us to this gentleman," Gavin said at once.

"Most certainly!"

The agent rose and hurried to the door, the clan following.

The moment Henshaw delivered them into the clutches of Claude Frew he beat a retreat, his mind on Highland warriors and concealed dirks. It took the clan several minutes before they fully understood the terms of their passage, as Frew outlined it, but by then the agent was safely away.

"He means to make slaves oot o' us for the next twa years!" one of them cried, pointing to the captain.

"Nonsense!" the master of the *Fleetwood* laughed. "Slavery has nothing to do with it. Besides, it's your choice. Nobody will force you."

He knew, of course, that they *had* no real choice. The alternative to what he offered was a rootless existence as they would be hounded like gypsies from county to county and compelled to hunt for food like animals, or worse, beg for it. With no money nor homes and made to suffer the stigma of vagabonds, they would not last long.

Frew yawned ostentatiously and pretended not to care one way or the other. "Take it or leave it," he told them with a careless shrug. "There's plenty of others with more sense than you have. They'll jump at the chance to make a fine new life for themselves."

When Gavin opened his mouth to say that they would take it, Keira hastily pulled him aside, whispering, "Oh God, I dinna trust him, Gavin. He's a cunning, sleekit-looking thing. I fear"

"What else can we do?" the lad whispered back, his eyes a little wild. "It's the only way oot, Keira; the only bit of light in this awful pit we've fallen into. We *have* tae go, lass. It can only be better there."

Captain Frew was both wily and brash. Long ago he had learned to profit from misfortune other people's misfortune. A sometime pirate, mercenary, and a natural-born crook, he had the opportunist's knack for making people do what he wanted. Further, unlike so many others in town, he was not in the least afraid of these so-called Highland savages with their homemade weapons and ridiculous pride in their heritage, not that they had much to be proud of now! Slapping official-looking documents in front of them, he ordered, "Sign or put

your mark there"jabbing the paper with a stubby finger where a diamond ring winked up at them coyly from the crinkly black hair matting his hands"and you'll never look back or

have cause to regret it."

They signed, indenturing themselves to Captain Claude Frew for the next two years in lieu of paying for their passage. Three days later they embarked on the *Fleetwood* for the long voyage across the Atlantic to British North America. The day they left their homeland was heart-wrenching, for they loved Scotland and always would. Keira, her brother, and her twelve-year-old sister scooped up handfuls of their native soil to take with them in the superstitious belief that it would keep them in closer touch with home. Amid the wailing and lamenting of the other passengers, the majority displaced like themselves, Keira thought of her parents, grandmother, and little brother left abandoned in their cold stone cairns. She sobbed brokenly in her brother's arms, "There's no one left to tend their graves. The valleys are empty. Why, Gavin?" She raised tear-drenched eyes to the youth's face. "Why did he do it?"

"For gain."

"Then he'll find one day that it wasn't worth it!" she suddenly cried passionately. "The money he makes will only buy his ruin."

If their leave-taking was agony, the journey to Canada was worse. All too soon, to their horror, the passengers discovered that they were braving the stormy Atlantic in a vessel that was far from seaworthy' and little better than a leaking cask of rotten wood. Four hundred hapless people were packed into an area barely large enough for half that number, and the water on board was fouled, the stinking holds crawling with rats. Belatedly the Radmuir group found out that they had been expected to provide themselves with food for the tripnot that they'd had any money to buy it. Subsequently, they had to depend on the generosity of Captain Frew, the fine Christian gentleman so warmly praised by Wilbur

Henshaw. Frew kept them on a starvation diet of moldy oats and turnips for the entire ten-week journey, yet, even so, loudly complained about the cost of the "expensive" victuals they consumed.

The living accommodations were horrendous, the berths merely rough oak planks deep in the fetid hold where murky darkness prevailed and

fresh air was a stranger. Here men, women, and children ate, washed, and slept together with no privacy whatsoever, lying side by side at night with only two feet of breathing space separating them from the row above, and the one below. Children screamed continuously. People were constantly seasick. After a week at sea, dysentery struck almost everyone and effluence trickled and then ran down between the cracks in the berths, soaking those lying below in vile-smelling slime.

Choking in the fumes, gasping for air, twelve-year-old Jessie MacKenzie wailed, "I want to die! I wish I had died in Scotland. I didn't want to come, Keira. I wanted to stay with Ma and Pa."

In the dark Keira felt for her hand and squeezed it. "Don't say that, Jess! You must never give up! Things will get better, you'll see."

"I wish I had died in Scotland," the girl repeated dully.

Just before noon the following day a purser came to Keira and Gavin and broke the news that their sister had thrown herself overboard. That very same day the first case of typhus was diagnosed, and before the week was out half the passenger list were seriously ill, most of them by that time too weak and traumatized to fight the disease. There were mass burials at sea every morning. Rapidly there was more and more room on the berths, the extra space even worse than the crowded conditions, considering the reason for it.

The day came when Keira held her dying brother in

her arms with barely enough strength to whisper to him, "Dinna leave me, lad. You are all I have, Gavin . . . all I have. Somebody has to live to tell our story, and no one can tell a story better than you, my dear one."

But he couldn't hear her. He was already gone, and she was alone.

"Well, you are a sorry sight, that you are," *announced* Captain Frew once he had dispensed with officialdom upon landing in Montreal and quickly segregated his non-paying passengers from those who had stumped up good money for the diabolical trip across the Atlantic. The number he had started with had been reduced to a third, and that meant a severe loss of profit for the captain, something he didn't take

kindly. He determined to do all he could to salvage what was left, though by the looks of them, he thought, it would take a miracle to save them.

Even Frew, callous as he was, felt a touch of pity as he assessed the Highlanders gathered before him. They were in a deplorable state, scarcely better than living corpses, and seemed stupefied by all the activity going on at the port.

With an attempt at levity, Frew joked, "We'll just have to clean and fatten you up a bit before we introduce you to Montreal society, now won't we?"

They gazed back at him dully and in silence, displaying no emotion whatsoever except for a young girl dressed in a kirtle made out of a tattered plaid blanket, who accused, "You have a lot to answer for, Captain Frew!"

A pair of smoky gray eyes burned into his, and instinctively Frew took a step backwards. Never had he seen such hatred in a woman's eyes. It fair chilled his blood. But he, after all, was not responsible for the storms at sea that had made them so sick, nor the disease that had decimated their ranks either! Nor was he to blame for the reason they'd had to leave Scotland in the first place.

Refusing to be made to feel guilty, Frew said, "Here's your chance to make a new start. Look at that cloudless blue sky," he rushed on, pointing upward. "That's a good omen-for the future."

But they were too benumbed with all they'd been through to take any interest in their surroundings and obeyed blindly when the captain marched them along the docks to a row of rickety wooden boardinghouses, establishments owned by Frew and his partners. Once inside they were given a meal of larded pork and all the potatoes they could eat, then were ordered to strip down and scrub themselves clean of the filth of the voyage. Their clothes were fumigated and boiled in vats, and only after all this was done were they shown to pallets covered with fresh straw. Some of the passengers were fainting with exhaustion and malnutrition.

Keira sobbed herself to sleep, and even in her sleep she wept for everything she had lost her home, her entire family, and the land where she had been born. The ache inside her was so severe it woke her in the middle of the night, and she began to choke, then scream, dementedly beating herself about the head and chest and rousing

everyone in the chamber. A

middle-aged matron lying beside her sat up on her own pallet and took the anguished girl firmly in her arms, saying understandingly, "Aye, cry it oot, lass. Let the hurt go"

"It will *never* go! Oh, God, I wish I were dead!"

"Nay, dinna take on so." The goodwife clasped her to her breast. "God meant ye to live for a reason, ye see, and the reason will become clear as time goes by. Forbye, I widna give the laird the satisfaction of having wiped oot your entire family, wi' nobody left to tell the tale."

That penetrated the agony in Keira's heart and mind. Aye, she thought, somebody had to survive to tell the tale, the very words she had spoken to Gavin before he passed away. *She* would live. And she would see to it that the name Hamish Ross, Earl of Strathvagan, was never forgotten, though he might wish it had.

With that goal in mind, Keira got through her first night in the new land, and only by keeping it always before her did she prevent herself from going mad. She blocked sorrow with hatred, poignant memories and tender impulses by reminding herself that there was no place in this life for softness of any kind. Only the hard-hearted prospered.

The Highlanders were surprised when Captain Frew seemed to have turned over a new leaf, plying them with food and ale, urging them to take plenty of rest and encouraging them to engage in mild exercise. He stressed cleanliness too, providing them with the necessary water daily, and even supplying secondhand clothes to those whose own garments were beyond saving.

"God must have spoken to him," one woman said.

Keira disagreed. "The devil, more likely! Only a fool would trust Captain Frew."

The change in the people was astounding, though

there were some who never recovered from the shock of leaving home and the rigors of the journey. For ten days the others received good care and they responded rapidly. They were the ones who had been the strongest to begin with, the ones with the fiercest will to live.

On the final day of their internment in the boardinghouses, Frew's agents marched their charges into the fledgling city of Montreal for a good long walk, anxious to bring some color to the still-pale cheeks. The wide-eyed Highlanders had their first close look at a town in their new country. It was not a heartening sight.

Montreal, they found, was a place of vivid contrasts. The center of the city displayed all the filth, chaos, and faintly malevolent atmosphere of a frontier town, which basically it still was. There were a few fine buildings, but most had been thrown up haphazardly and in haste, and they were made of wood rather than the solid brick and stone to be found in Scotland. The majority of the streets were of baked mudmires when it rained with in some districts open sewer ditches running down one side of the roads, clouds of flies buzzing over them. The city seethed with a constantly shifting population of people from many lands Scots, English, French, and other Europeans, many of whom were convicted felons who had fled their own countries to evade the law.

The agent conducting their tour said, "There's over a hundred men at least for every woman hereabouts."

"Then we've come to the right place!" a young single woman laughed.

The agent stopped and glowered at her. "You don't know what I'm talking about, do you? You people" he shook his head and sighed "are so blasted naive and innocent, fresh from the hills with the straw still sticking out of your ears! What I'm saying," he continued grimly, "is that this town, this whole coun-

try, is full of chancers out to make money however they can, and they aren't at all fussy about how they have to do it. No woman, young *or* old, dare set a foot in Montreal alone, and don't forget that!"

"Fine spot we've come to," a man grumbled.

"It can be," the agent replied, "for the wise."

The next shock was the Indians.

"Savages!" one of the children shrieked, and all the women promptly covered their eyes as a half-naked tawny-skinned man emerged from a shop across the street clad in a fringed buffalo-hide apron and beaded moccasins, his long black hair braided and bedecked with feathers.

Amused at their reaction, the agent drew their attention to the axelike weapon the Indian wore tucked into his belt. "That's a tomahawk," he explained, "and used to scalp his enemies. Naturally," he added, "the white man is at the top of his list. The Indians don't want us in their country."

"Frew should have told us that before we left Scotland!" a Highlander said angrily, his own hand sliding under his tattered cloak to his dirk.

"You aren't wanted in Scotland either," their tour guide reminded them.

That shut them up and they returned to their boardinghouses very subdued.

At supper that evening Keira said, "I canna imagine Captain Frew keeping us here in idleness much longer, and I'm anxious to know what sort of work he'll expect us to do to pay off our bonds."

"Aye," many echoed, and it was obvious that the majority had had the same thought. One youth said worriedly, "I hope we'll no' be asked to work on the boat. I never want to see the inside o' *that* craft again!"

"Amen," the rest nodded.

As it turned out, they didn't have long to wonder. At nine o'clock the next morning Captain Frew and his

agents lined up the people and to their astonishment informed them that they had important business to attend to, also that it would be greatly to their advantage to conduct themselves in a pleasant, willing manner. "Now is your chance to show your stuff," he told the puzzled Highlanders, who had absolutely no conception of what he was getting at. "Above all, be enthusiastic and amenable."

"Why?" Keira ventured with a pang of uneasiness. "What's happening?"

In answer Frew waved them down the street. "Follow me."

After a longish walk along the waterfront they halted at a huge building that looked like a warehouse. Keira noticed that there were billboards plastered up all over the section near a set of enormous double-doors, though since she couldn't read they made no sense to her. Quite a large crowd of keen-eyed men milled about the entrance, and the girl shrank inwardly when these men looked her people over

closely, one of them commenting, "Hell, they already look worn out. Don't seem capable of a good day's work." But the fellow beside him, his eyes on Keira, snickered, "A fine covey of women, though. I wouldn't mind working some of them."

The arrival of an emigrant ship was a big event in Montreal. The New World needed all the settlers it could get, and fresh arrivals were always welcome. Strong backs and the stamina for hard work were at a premium, and since Culloden, when thousands of displaced Highlanders had been pouring onto the North American continent, their capacity for hard labor and* the drive to get ahead was held in high esteem. Most of them had gained the reputation of being honest, enterprising, and dependable. They were true to their word.

Naturally, there were always those quick to exploit

the newly arrived, when they were still vulnerable and gullible. Men like Captain Frew. Frew and his partners had a good scheme going for them. They had banded together to purchase a ship to transport the evicted and destitute to Canada, and once the Scots had been rested and nourished and given a little time to recover from the voyage, they were taken to a rented warehouse and their bonds sold off to farmers, lumbermen, and many from the lucrative fur trade, all anxious to procure cheap labor. Then there were the ones who came seeking wives, and in a lot of cases, just a woman.

"Come along, come along," urged Frew and his agents, pushing the Highlanders through the big double-doors when they hesitated at the entrance. Once they were inside the smoke-filled warehouse packed with men who had come to the sale, the doors were slammed shut and bolted behind them. "Up on that platform, yonder," Frew said, pointing to a kind of stage, "and be quick about it. The crowd are getting restless."

At that the people balked, demanding to know why they had been brought here, their voices so loud and manner so agitated that finally Claude Frew had to answer them. "I've brought you here to sell off your bonds. You'll find new masters here today, but obviously they want to have a look at what they're buying first."

The Highlanders were stunned and momentarily rendered speechless, glancing in horror from Frew to each other. Sell off their bonds! Find new masters! Though they had no love for Captain Frew, they reasoned that "better a devil you know than one you don't," and after

a shocked silence they broke into a howl of protest, crying, "You can't do that! You can't just auction us off like beasts at the market fair!"

"Now look here" Frew held up his hand for

silence "I assure you I can, and I have the law on my side. You may break it at your peril."

When the shouting died down, he studied them soberly for a moment, then continued, "I hold your bonds, it's true, but I have no need for you now that we've arrived here. Therefore I intend to sell off my financial interest in you which I've every legal right to do! You put your names and marks on the documents agreeing to give two years' service in place of paying for your passage, and whether you serve me or someone else makes no difference." He gave them a hard look from under his brows, annoyed at the fuss they had caused and afraid it might discourage potential buyers. "You will keep to our bargain or suffer the consequences," he warned.

At that several burly henchmen stepped forward to maintain order. They were dressed in a kind of uniform that looked official and intimidating. All were armed. The Highlanders were still angry and filled with a sense of injustice, but they realized that Captain Frew had a point. They *had* signed the bonds; they *had* willingly agreed to give two years' service, and none of them knew enough about the law to gainsay Frew's contention that he had the right to sell them off if he chose. There was nothing they could do, at least for now, with a small army of hired guards blocking the doors of the building.

Keira, trembling from head to foot, suppressed the impulse to bolt, knowing it was hopeless. Again they had been betrayed by someone in a position of power and they were helpless to do anything about it. As indentured servants they would be sold off to new masters. God, she wanted no one to master her ever again! Nor would they, she promised herself wildly, bond or no bond!

Frew, seated at a kind of high desk with a seat attached to it, brought down his gavel at last and the

sale began. His agent motioned for a young newly married couple to step forward. They were promptly sold off to the owner of a bakery who assured them with a cheery wink, "You'll never want for bread in my house."

The couple went off with him quite happily.

Next a family with three half-grown children found a compassionate employer in a farmer, a man who also happened to be Scots and ten years before had been evicted from *his* overlord's estate. "Welcome!" he told the bewildered Highlanders. "You've come amongst friends."

A single woman was next, the woman who had remarked that they had come to the right place when Frew's agent informed them during their tour of Montreal that there were a hundred men for every woman. She practically leaped off the platform when a strapping young American lumberman bid for her eagerly.

In spite of themselves, everybody had to laugh. The potential bride was quite plain and very tiny, about half the size of her potential groom, but, as a man standing behind Keira chuckled, she was game.

The people had begun to relax a little, their fears lulled to a certain extent. So far it hadn't been too bad, and the moment of laughter had broken the tension. Standing next to Keira was a tall lad who made her think of Gavin, since he too had reddish hair and freckles. The boy was with his parents, a couple who had had him late in life. Unlike their son, who looked amazingly healthy in spite of the long voyage, they had barely survived the journey.

"You!" Frew's agent waved at the youth, who obediently came forward with his emaciated mother and father clinging to his side. The agent pushed the parents back when someone in the audience shouted, "I'll give you five pounds for the lad but I've no use for

the old folks. Five pounds for the boy," the man repeated firmly.

Keira bowed her head and clapped her hands over her ears to blot out the sight and sound of the family being separated, the parents wailing and stretching out their arms to their son, the son battling desperately with the henchmen who dragged him away from them.

Then *she* was hauled forward and her own time had come. Inwardly she shrank from the hundreds of eager pairs of eyes looking her over, but outwardly Keira steeled herself to stand proud and strong, her eyes fixed on a spot directly across the hall and well above the heads of the assembly, determined not to give them the satisfaction of knowing how terrified and self-conscious they made her feel. She stood aloof, mentally removing herself from the degrading proceedings, and didn't as much as flinch when Captain Frew waxed

poetic' in describing her merits.

"Ah, now here is something special," he began. "A beautiful virgin with a face and form to set fire to men's dreams. What a wife she'd make! Or failing that, a housemaid or cozy woman." He smiled and winked, adding, "Use your imagination, lads. One way or another I'm sure you can think of a good use for her. All right, then, what am I bid?"

Keira swayed and for a second felt dizzy, as if she would faint or be sick right there in front of them. The dirk! she thought, reminding herself of the weapon her father had made her and which she kept strapped to her right leg just under the knee. She could end it here and now, pull the knife and use it on herself before they could stop her. It was a sin against God to take one's own life, but then she no longer believed in God anyway.

"Seven pounds!" somebody shouted.

"Eight!"

"Nine pounds for the wench."

At mention of the insulting word "*wench*," Keira's eyes flickered from the ceiling at the back of the warehouse to the bidder near the front, and she felt a jolt of revulsion. The man was tall with a powerful build. He was dressed in strange fringed leather clothing, and his lank dark hair trailed over his jacket collar. But it was his face . . . the entire right side hideously burned and scarred, the eye gone and the lips twisted grotesquely into a snarl.

Keira felt instinctive revulsion; then, typically, came pity. To have to go through life like that! she thought, and shuddered. To suffer the shocked stares and the whispers, the shouted remarks of children. And to look in the glass and see that face gazing back at you!

"Ten pounds!" the fellow bellowed, and glared around as if daring anyone to go higher.

Keira was ashamed of herself for hoping she wouldn't go to him and all on the strength of how he looked! In actual fact, having suffered himself, he would probably make the best employer, she scolded herself. But at the same time she began to take an active interest in the proceedings, trembling inside each time the scarred one increased his bid. He did so vigorously and determinedly until he was the only one left. Claude Frew started to bring down his gavel when a deep,

French-accented voice spoke up from the back of the room.

"I'll give you twenty pounds sterling for the girl's bond!" announced the newcomer.

A hush fell in the hall. All eyes jumped to the back of the building. The man who stood there, leaning indolently against the wall, was Luc Duval, a prosperous fur trader and head of his own company. Duval had come to the sale looking for likely emigrants to bring into his firm, a business that spanned thousands

of miles between Montreal and the uncharted territory beyond Hudson Bay. He had come looking for strong men; Luc had no place for a woman in his company, nor did he want Keira in' a personal sense, but as he told Frew later, he would have fought a duel to prevent the notoriously vicious Bratchy from getting his hands on a dog, much less an innocent young girl. Seth Bratchy the fur trapper was well-known in the trade as being a surely loner, a cruel, vindictive character suspected of more than one murder in the wilds; the kind of man who never forgot a slight or forgave an insult. He had once tracked for almost a thousand miles a fellow trapper whom he suspected of cheating him. Besides, Luc had a personal score to settle with Bratchy over the matter of Sweetwater, the daughter of an Indian chief. Now was his chance.

The disfigured trapper was enraged when Duval snatched the girl away from him at the last minute and with a roar of fury whipped out a dagger and attacked Luc in front of the horrified onlookers. He picked on the wrong man. The Frenchman was an expert with the rapier, and as the crowd scattered to make room for them, Duval proceeded coolly and nimbly to teach the bully a much-needed lesson in manners.

Keira watched in terrified amazement as the two men fought for her, though they were both total strangers to her. As the clash of steel rang through the hall she glanced about wildly, deciding that this was just the time to try to make her escape. Leaping off the platform, pushing her way through the people watching the fight, she made it only as far as the door before she found herself locked in the iron grasp of one of Claude Frew's henchmen.

"Let me go!" she screamed, scratching and biting and kicking out with all her might.

The guard laughed, enjoying the feel of her squirming body wriggling

against him. "You should be

flattered to have strong men battling for your favors," he told her, at the same time sliding a meaty hand up from her slim waist to her breast. " 'Twill just make them all the keener to have you."

Neither would "have" her, of that Keira was determined! The thought of it chilled her blood. Not only were they strangers, they were savages and brutes, fighting over her like male dogs fighting over a bitch in heat. It was obscene and disgusting! It was also obvious that neither man had come to the sale looking for a mere servant to work for them; what employer would go so far as to engage in combat over the services of an untrained girl?

When Keira raised her head from trying to bite the hands that held her, it was to see that the fight was over and the tall Frenchman had won. Bratchy was limping to the door with blood streaming from a thigh wound, Duval prodding him onward with his sword. Keira shrank back against the guard when the red-faced trapper came abreast of her. There he stopped and stared her in the face, as if assessing what he'd lost. Up close he looked monstrous, inhuman, one eye shriveled up in crinkled flesh, the other tiny and piercing and so pale and void of emotion that it looked dead. In a voice that was deep and at the same time hollow, as if echoing in an empty room, he told her, "Enjoy the Frenchman while you can, for it won't last long." And with a glance over his shoulder at the man behind him, he snarled, "Neither you or the girl will ever have a peaceful moment again, Duval."

With that, Bratchy kicked the door, which was hastily opened for him, and barged out into the spring sunshine. He didn't look back.

In the charged silence that followed his departure, Keira and Luc Duval stared at each other. He was tall and supple, Keira saw, with dark olive skin, hawklike features, and bold dark eyes that seared into hers, as if

intent on burning a path to her very soul. As they stood there, she could feel the power of the man begin to exert some sort of intangible hold over her and suddenly Keira found the Frenchman who now owned her bond almost as intimidating as Seth Bratchy, though in an entirely different way. Her immediate impulse was to break eye contact; to turn away from him, but that would have been tantamount to acknowledging his mastery over her, and that she could *never* do,

not with bitter memories of the Earl of Strathvagan so fresh in her mind. The Earl, Keira vowed, was the *last* man who would ever control her.

Duval was taken aback at the hostility he saw in her eyes which she didn't bother to hide, so different from the way women usually looked at him and from this woman he had a right to expect gratitude for saving her from: a brute like Seth Bratchy. He spoke without thinking, introducing himself in French, "Je m'appelle Luc Duval." And curiously, "Comment vous appelez-vous?"

The girl regarded him stonily and didn't reply.

"Ah, désolé!" He struck his forehead with the heel of his hand. "I'm sorry. You don't speak French?" When Keira shook her head, he inquired, "And what is your name, mademoiselle?"

"Keira MacKenzie."

"I see . . ."

The crowd were watching them with interest, and Luc reasoned that he had given them enough of a show as it was. He took the girl's arm firmly and propelled her outside into the yard, noticing idly how her long hair which in the warehouse had looked dark brown suddenly blazed brightly in the strong spring sunlight. He had hardly looked at her while she was up on the platform with the other new arrivals, not even when he had called out his successful bid, but when he turned her to face him he experienced a start

of surprise at how young she was . . . young and beautiful, with delicate features and large clear gray eyes that held a challenge. "What sort of job do you want me to do?" she asked him, and tensed.

Luc shrugged. "I haven't thought." He raised his head and scanned the people milling about the yard, but the trapper had vanished. "Come," he said, and took her arm, anxious to get her away. "We can think of work later."

Keira resisted. "Please let me go?" There was real pleading in her voice. "Give me my freedom?" She was very pale and trembling violently, and as he started to frown and shake his head impatiently, she burst out, "I won't be kept in bondage! I'd rather die first!"

Duval recoiled. He stared down at her irritably, belatedly asking

himself exactly what he'd gotten into. "You don't understand, mademoiselle; it is not so simple," he told her, thinking of the situation in Montreal, a turbulent, barely civilized and practically lawless city packed with foreigners of every persuasion and description, many criminals among them, men who wouldn't hesitate to use and exploit an innocent young girl. No, he decided as he looked her over, he couldn't just cast her adrift and live easy with his conscience thereafter, though now that he had her, in truth, Luc had absolutely no idea what to do with her.

"Listen to me." He put a hand on her shoulder, ignoring the way she stiffened, and looked deep in her eyes, intent on impressing his next words on her. "You would not be safe here. This is a dangerous place for a girl on her own. Much better you stay with me."

With that a muscular arm swept around Keira's waist and he half-carried her to where he had tethered up his horse and all but threw her up into the saddle in front of him, turning a deaf ear to her protests.

Patience was not one of Luc Duval's virtues, and now that he'd taken the time to explain the situation to the girl, he expected her to see the sense in it. She didn't, of course. Keira was convinced he was making it up, trying to frighten her for reasons of his own and that frightened her even more! Her pale face flamed when his arm snaked around her waist and she felt his hard body imprint itself against hers. She went rigid, then tried to pull away.

Luc bent his lips to her ear, warning, "People who try to break their bonds are severely punished. The dungeon at the fort is crawling with rats and lice, and those interred there are so hungry they would kill for a crust of bread." Then lower. "And the jailors take turns playing vile games with young female prisoners. Would you like me to describe some of the things they do to them?"

"No!" Keira broke in, shuddering. But she finally stopped struggling.

They started off along the busy waterfront where men were loading and unloading ships while gulls swooped and soared over their heads, their raucous cries mingling with the sound of hammering. The smells of hot pitch and strong fish filled the air. Keira sat stiff and aloof now, trying hard to ignore the man seated behind her, but acutely conscious of his hard chest against her back and the corded muscles of his thighs pressed against her hips. Don't show him how afraid you are, she

warned herself, and try to keep calm and alert. At least she still had her dirk! He didn't know about that. Aye, and she would use it too if she had to.

Angry and frightened-as she was, Keira understood that the bond *was* a legal document. No escaping that fact! Also, that she *could* be punished if she tried to break it by running away. Very well, she thought

grimly, for the next two years he had the right to treat her like a slave and work her fingers to the bonebut work was all he was entitled to from her! If he tried anything else, well . . . she still had her knife.

Luc Duval too was alert, but for a different reason. His dark eyes constantly scanned the teeming waterfront for a man with a scarred face, convinced that Seth Bratchy would not let the matter rest between them; that wasn't the trapper's nature. But as they turned down a littered street leading into town, Luc began to relax a little and found his curiosity piqued about the slight girl seated in front of him. "Where are your family?" he asked Keira conversationally.

It was as if a hemp rope, such as she'd noticed tied around the crates on the docks, had been tightened around her chest, and a lump swelled in her throat. A gush of hot tears welled into her eyes. The tenuous grip she'd tried to keep on her emotions immediately began to crumble and Keira didn't dare open her mouth for fear of breaking down completely.

"Well?" Luc prompted, and leaned forward as he tried to see her face, which Keira was careful to keep turned away from him. "Surely you can tell me that much? Are they here with you in Montreal?" She had been brought forward alone at the sale, Duval recalled, but that didn't necessarily mean anything. Families were frequently separated when their bonds were sold. To Luc it was a cruel practice, but men like Claude Frew were not noted for their compassion and sensitivity. "Where are they?" he repeated, beginning to get annoyed with her again.

"Dead." How much that one word cost her!

Again Luc craned his head around, trying to see her face, but Keira kept hers averted. The terse reply to his question about her people came out sounding flat and unemotional to Duval, leaving him with the

impression that she was cold and unfeeling. "How long have they been dead?" he queried, his tone quite cool.

Keira closed her eyes, the pain intense. Even if she'd been able to discuss it she had no intention of doing so with a total stranger. Desperately she changed the subject in a bid to distract him from questions about her lost family. "Where are you taking me; where are we going?"

"To my hotel."

This time Keira twisted around in the saddle to glare at him. "If you touch me," she said, "I'll kill you."

Duval almost laughed aloud, thinking that he'd sooner touch a porcupine.

4

Keira and Luc faced each other with the entire length of the room between them. Each time he took a step forward, she backed away. Feeling as if he were taking part in some ridiculous dance, Duval tired of chasing her and leaned his back against the door and folded his arms across his chest. He had taken off his jacket when they entered the room and tossed it on the bed. Now, in a flowing white shirt and snug-fitting breeches, broad in the shoulders and long in the leg, his hair gleaming blue-black in the light coming in the window and with a peculiar smile on his face, he seemed the very essence of the predatory male to the frightened girl watching him.

They were in the Imperial Hotel, one of the better hotels in Montreal but no more than second-rate by European standards. To Keira, who had never seen anything remotely like it, it was very grand. The chamber was at least twice the size of her tiny one-room cottage in Scotland where seven people had

lived without even realizing they were cramped. It had fine polished wood furniture such as only the gentry could buy, and pretty glass lamps and a real bed with a silken coverlet.

Keira naturally assumed that Duval must be very rich, perhaps almost as rich as the Earl of Strathvagan, the only other man she knew who could afford such luxury. Immediately the two men became synonymous in her mind. Both stood for wealth and power, and both

had the arrogance and audacity to try to control the lives of others; they were the type of men she most despised, most distrusted.

"Who will I have to share this room with?" Keira asked suspiciously, thinking that, magnificent as it was, she would sooner sleep in a cow byre than share it with this stranger.

Luc frowned; he found her prickly manner insulting, considering all he had done for her. "Since I paid for the room the answer should be obvious," he replied sharply, though the thought of bedding the girl had never entered his mind.

"No," she shook her head, "that I cannot do."

Her manner was utterly hostile and combative and made no sense to Duval. Normally, women liked him, and when he thought of the character of the man he had saved her from and the price he had paid for her bond it seemed to Luc that the girl should have been down on her knees thanking him instead of spitting at him like a viper. Well, he thought, the time had come to make certain things clear, especially the fact that he had no interest in her body; no interest in her at all, really, other than a humane one, as he would have had for any other women in her situation.

He motioned to her. "Come here."

Instead of obeying, Keira glared at him and turned her head away.

Luc suddenly darted forward and in seconds had

her cornered between a heavy mahogany chest and a wardrobe, and after a brief struggle caught her face in his hands and made her look at him, his one intention to force her to listen to what he had to say. But when he gazed down into her lovely frightened face he felt himself melting. He bent his head and kissed her gently on the lips, reasoning that she needed affection more at that moment than a lecture.

For a second or two Keira didn't move. He had just dropped his hands to put his arms around her, to assure her that she had nothing to be afraid of, when she bent down suddenly and the next instant there was a knife in her hand. "Do that again," she panted, "and I'll tear that handsome face of yours to shreds!"

Startled, Luc jumped back. He made as if to turn away, then spun

around and gripped her wrist, tightening his fingers until the weapon clattered to the floor. He kicked the dirk to the other side of the room, then looked at her grimly. "Perhaps I should have let the trapper have you instead of risking my life to save you," he growled, annoyed at himself now for kissing her. What had made him do that? Surely a gentle pat on the cheek would have sufficed, yes, and probably achieved more. Good God, it wasn't as if he wanted her. Yet . . . there was something about the girl . . . something that aroused all his protective instincts.

If anything, Keira was more hostile now, and scoffed, "Oh, you didn't risk your life for me, sir! You fought him because . . . because you were determined to have me for yourself."

"Que de . . . !" Luc might have been amused at her high opinion of herself if he hadn't been so angry. Coldly he looked her up and down. "And you are such a prize that men should duel over you, a skinny little girl with no breasts and hips like a whippet and the personality of a viper. *Of course* men would fight for your favormadmen!"

He pulled her to the nearest chair and sat her down. "Now, listen to me closely. You can count yourself fortunate that you *didn't* go to Seth Bratchy," Luc told her harshly, his dark eyes boring into hers. "You don't know the man as I do; he's lower than the lowest form of animal. The burns you saw on his face were done to him by Indians after he had brutally used one of their women." Luc paused for a moment to let that sink in, then advised, "So you would do well to try to accept the situation as it stands now and stop behaving like a willful child."

He gave Keira a hard look from under his brows, then straightened up and strode to the door where he stooped to pick up her dirk, then left the room.

Keira exhaled slowly, only then realizing that she'd been holding her breath. The things he had told her about Bratchy could be lies, and it was ridiculous of Duval to expect her to believe that he had risked his life for her, a total stranger, for the sole purpose of keeping her from the trapper, she thought indignantly.

"Do you think I'm daft?" Keira called in the direction of the door.

Keira glanced at the door, feeling uneasy and defenseless without her dirk, but at least she was relieved that Duval had left her alone. That surprised her. She had been so sure he would try to force himself on her, beginning with that kiss. Well, obviously the kiss hadn't pleased

him, any more than the sight of her close up had stirred his passion. Thank God! she sighed deeply. Thank God!

Still . . . he'd had no right to make insulting remarks about her appearance.

Keira got up and crossed the room to where the cheval-glass stood before the window and examined herself in the mirror. She was shocked. She looked worse than the worst tinker-girl she had ever seen, skinny as a whippet, just as Duval had said, her face

so narrow and pale and her eyes as huge and dark as the loch before a thunderstorm. The makeshift garment that covered her thin frame had been hastily fashioned out of an old plaid blanket that her brother Gavin had managed to grab when they were driven from Radmuir. It was faded and riddled with holes.

With a quick glance at the door, Keira opened the top of her robe and exposed her chest. Her eyes widened in horror. No breasts, just as that devil had sneered. Where once there had been silken fullness, now only shriveled wee apples remained.

Why hadn't she noticed what was happening to her? In a dim way Keira *had* been conscious of losing weight, but there had been no mirrors around to see herself in, and besides, she'd had more immediate problems to worry her, like struggling to survive.

Duval had not minced words. She didn't appeal to him.

"Good!" she said. "Then he won't pester me."

She grasped the mirror by its frame and turned it so that it faced the wall, then went back to the bed and sat down, feeling the time had come to consider the situation as calmly as possible and try to face facts, the most unpalatable being that she was under the influence of yet another powerful man, at least for the next two years. It gave Keira a bittersweet satisfaction to know that Duval was no happier about the situation than she was; he realized now that he had made a bad bargain at the sale. "Buy in haste," she muttered grimly, "and repent at leisure."

But she could have told him something that might have surprised him. She hadn't always looked like this; in Radmuir she'd had the reputation of being the bonniest lass in all of Strathvagan valley. At home she could have had any man she wanted!

Now that he was so disappointed in his "purchase," would Duval take his cue from Claude Frew and try to

sell on her bond? Keira brooded. Somehow that thought brought her no comfort either. She wanted to be free of these commanding men! Somehow, and she'd find a way, she would break loose and make her own path in life. All she need do, Keira told herself, was to stay alert and bide her time.

Luc stood at the window of his own room cursing himself for being an impulsive fool. In the quiet -chamber he seemed to hear the scolding of his former teachers, the very same teachers who had once tried to curb that flaw in his character and frequently warned him that it would land him in serious trouble one day.

Well, Luc thought with a sigh, that day had come. He felt it instinctively.

He was twenty-seven years old, the son of a voyageur, the men who rowed the men and goods of the fur trade to and from their distant depots in the wilderness of North America. Luc had been born in the small town of Lachine about ten miles from Montreal, the spot where the great trading brigades left civilization for the long, dangerous journey to acquire pelts from the Indians. His father had worked for the North West Fur Company, that thorn-in-the-flesh and great competitor of the mighty Hudson's Bay Company, and Luc had thrilled as a boy to gather at the river With the rest of the crowd to bid bon voyage to the brave canoeists who struck off into the wilds in search of furs to supply the constant demands from Europe. Some day, he remembered promising himself as a boy, he would be one of them, a voyageur just like his father. His imagination caught fire thinking of all the adventures he would have battling the boiling rapids on the rivers, cutting a path through virgin snow and ice, and pitting his wits against the Indians who brought their furs to the trading forts to be bartered for the likes of knives and blankets, beads, mirrors,

and guns. He would see distant Hudson Bay and even more distant Athabasca, a round-trip journey that took as much as two years to complete and spanned almost six thousand miles, most of it through uncharted territory. In this remote hinterland, for most of the year a frozen wasteland, the precious furs were gathered and eventually brought back to Montreal, there to be graded and shipped off to the big fur auctions in London and Paris.

His father, Marchand Duval, had rarely been home, but the times when he *had* come home were always marvelously exciting for Luc. His father always brought back the most thrilling tales of his adventures, and, listening to them, entranced, Luc came to a decision. The life of a voyageur was the one for him!

His mother had other ideas. From the start, Margot Duval vowed to herself that her son would *not* become a voyageur. Her only child was tall, straight, and handsomethe way her husband had been once. Now Marchand looked stunted, his back stooped and his shoulders permanently hunched, fixed forever in the posture of rowing a heavy freight canoe. She hated to hear Luc boasting that one day he would follow in his father's footsteps, but only once did her patience snap. "You will never go on the river, that I assure you," she told him firmly.

"I will, Maman, I will!" the boy contradicted, for even then Luc had been willful and headstrong. "That's what I want to do, and you can't force me into anything else. Isn't that right, Papa?"

Her husband had been no help. Like all the voyageurs, he was proud of the work he did. The men who navigated the intricate and bewildering waterways of the Northwest were a special breed, and they knew it. After all, no one else knew the region as they did. Without them the massive fur industry would come to a standstill, because other than the Indians and a few

explorers they alone could find their way along the maze of rivers and lakes, past dangerous rapids and waterfalls en route, and the voyageurs considered themselves to be vastly more reliable than Indians and explorers.

"There are none like us," Marchand often bragged. "You might say we are unique. Who else could withstand the grueling hard work and monotony of paddling a loaded canoe for months at a time, often having to cart it overland with its burden when the rapids are too difficult to navigate? And who else would have the courage and endurance to suffer constant attacks from Indians and wild animals, freezing temperatures, and sometimes even starvation when the food runs out and game is scarce? Who else, I ask you?"

"Yes, who else?" Luc would always echo at this point. "Answer *that*, Maman."

His mother always looked unimpressed. "And where is your great reward for all this hard work and courage, eh? Are we rich? Do we

live in a grand house and wear fancy clothes? No! It's the fur barons you labor for who are rich and they don't have to risk life nor limb or even lift a finger!" She pointed at Luc then, adding, "Remember that, you foolish boy."

His mother had always had great ambitions for him, and she had been a very determined woman, so determined that she had gradually brought her husband around to her way of thinking. She set aside a goodly part of the wages Marchand earned and worked continuously herself so that Luc could be sent to school in preparation for the wonderful future she envisioned for him. Then, when he was thirteen, she arranged for him to attend a boarding school near Paris, an institution that prepared its students to enter the world of finance. Luc, his mother decided, would be a banker.

How he resented his mother's aspirations for him! And how he had resented her sending him away from home. For months after he arrived in Paris Luc had been miserably homesick, and his studies had suffered accordingly. He had been threatened with expulsion, destined to return home in disgrace, but then something occurred that changed everything. He made friends with Roi Menard and Jules D'Arly.

The D'Arly family home was far away in Nice, but Roi Menard's artist father lived in an old farmhouse less than fifty miles south of Paris, and here the boys were made welcome during vacations from school. Rex Menard, Roi's father, was relaxed and easygoing, rather dreamy by nature, and one of the kindest, gentlest people that Luc had ever met. Naturally interested in his son's friends, and *very* intrigued about Luc's life in Canada, Menard soon drew out the homesick teen-ager, and before long Luc found himself pouring out all his hopes and dreams, even his anger and resentment at being sent away from home, into the sympathetic ear of the artist. It was a relief to unburden himself. It was also pleasant to ramble about the fields and woods surrounding the Menard farmhouse, to swim in the river and explore the three-hundred-year-old barn with its mysterious attics and cellars. Then at night to play chess or just talk about all kinds of interesting subjects in front of a roaring fire, and Rex Menard was a man with a vivid imagination and some far-reaching ideas, which Luc found exciting and stimulating. He came to look forward to these visits intensely. Soon Menard was like a second father to Luc, and in turn treated him like a son.

There was another attraction at Chartreux: Roi's sister Clarise, only a year younger than themselves. At first Luc barely tolerated the girl

tagging after them and half-resented her kittenish demonstrations of

affection, which he found embarrassing, but as time passed and he grew older, that changed. By the time he graduated from school and went to work as a clerk in the bank, he was actively vying with Jules D'Arly for those very same kittenish affections, counting himself lucky when Clarise showed a marked preference for himself. With her soft brown hair and hazel eyes, she was the sweetest, prettiest girl in the world and he was in love! Then, very suddenly, she became his fiancée.

Roi Menard was tragically killed under the rampaging hoofs of a runaway carriage horse. His father, who had long suffered from recurrent tuberculosis, became seriously ill, his illness aggravated by worry about his daughter and what would become of her if he died. It was then that Luc made one of his reckless announcements. "I'm going to marry Clarise!" he informed the ailing man, a man Luc had much to thank for. "So you can set your mind at rest. It won't be for some time. At the moment I'm in no position to marry anyone. But as soon as my circumstances improve, Clarise will become my wife with your permission, of course."

"Granted!" Rex Menard said at once, and heartily wrung Luc's hand.

But Jules D'Arly bowed out of the betrothal celebrations after telling Luc sourly, "You are not right for her. Your restless nature can only make her unhappy. I know from what you've told me that some day you hope to return to Canada, and Clarise is a Frenchwoman through and through, and would be miserable if taken out of her own environment. It's a mistake, Duval, and one day you'll realize it."

Luc put that down to jealousy and promptly ignored it.

But one thing D'Arly said was true. He *did* eventually hope to return to live in Canada, his old dream still simmering away at the back of his mind. From the

start, Luc was dissatisfied with banking where promotion was slow and everything seemed to move at a sedate crawl. It was a staid career that filled him with growing frustration and impatience, anxious as he was to get ahead in life. When a letter arrived from Canada telling him that his father had been killed on a trading mission into Indian country, Luc took a leave of absence from the job he despised and sailed home to comfort his mother only to find that she had died more

than a year before. Her last words to her husband had been, "Promise you won't tell Luc about me. Nothing must interrupt his career. Later, once he's established, then you can break the news to him."

Luc had been devastated. The shock of that homecoming remained vivid in his mind to this day. Life was so fleeting, and he decided then to waste no more of it in pursuing a career that he was obviously not suited for, though the education that his parents had struggled so hard to provide was soon to stand him in good stead. Luc made the decision to go into business for himself in Canada. He would be a fur merchant, a sort of compromise between his father's life of freedom and adventure and the world of commerce his mother had envisioned for him. Thereupon he sat down and wrote a letter of resignation to the bank, then a more difficult one to Clarise and her father, explaining his reasons for taking the abrupt new direction in life. To build up a business would take years, he wrote, and if Clarise was not prepared to wait, then he would understand. But it was simply something that he must do, and he hoped they would wish him well.

They did. Wholeheartedly. And Clarise promised to wait for him, however long it took.

That had been six years ago, difficult, often highly dangerous years when Luc roamed the Northwest fur territory trying to stake out his own domain and make

contacts with Indians who would bring their pelts to him. He had met with immediate and implacable resistance from the mighty Hudson's Bay Company, which already monopolized millions of acres in the Northwest and brooked no interference from independents. Time and again the mostly English "Company of Adventurers Trading into Hudson Bay" to give it its full title had driven Luc out of its terrain, and had often resorted to violence to do it. This was the company with the exclusive Royal Charter so generously given by King Charles II at the instigation of his far-sighted cousin, Prince Rupert, far back in 1670, and it had no real competition until a group of daring Scottish merchants based in Montreal set up in opposition more than a hundred years later.

From that time on the two major fur companies were at war, the North West Company, as the Montreal group called themselves, making up in vigor and determination what they lacked in the way of official permission to trade in the Northwest. They took the view that a king ruling a country thousands of miles away from North America

king who had no true conception of the nature and potential of the land he had so munificently gifted to his favorites had no right to pass out charters severely restricting the trade of others. The North West directors thumbed their audacious noses at royal charters and deemed them to be illegal.

Through his father, Luc had connections in the North West firm, which, while it too took a dim view of independents, tolerated him. Eventually Luc acquired the money to buy his own canoes and hire a crew of voyageurs to man them. He established his own trading forts and formed a working relationship with the Indians, making it worth their while to bypass the larger companies. This meant taking slightly less profit, but it was worth it.

Now, six years down the rocky road, Luc Duval began to feel the warm glow of success and he was still a young man with the energy and creativity to expand in countless directions. He had seen Clarise only once during all that time, when he had visited Paris three years ago at the time Rex Menard died, and offered to marry her immediately. Luc thought it only fair to warn her of the roving life he led while gathering his pelts, which he must continue to do if he hoped to stay in business. Clarise, after listening to him, seemed to sense that the time was not right for marriage. Not yet. She would go to live with an elderly aunt, she said, and when he could afford to set up a home for them in Montreal, then she would come to him and they could finally be married.

Three more years were to pass before Luc could write to her, "Today I purchased the site of our home in Mount Royal. Not long now, ma chérie . . ."

That had been last week.

Then today today he had gone out and done an incredibly stupid thing, a mistake that Luc suspected might not be easy to rectify. Why in God's name had he bought that girl's bond? Was it because she had looked so forlorn and helpless on that platform, and with Bratchy so determined to have her . . . ?

In an irritable mood, Luc strode out of his room and ordered one of his men to take Keira a tray of food. "And make sure she eats it," he ordered morosely. "She's as thin as a stick."

Maurice, Luc's chief voyageur or gouvernail, opened Keira's door to find her sound asleep across the bed. Bending over her, he sucked in a

breath. "Elle a l'air d'une enfant!" he muttered in astonishment, wondering what Duval's motives could be. The girl was very beautiful with her bright russet hair and dainty features but so young! And worse so skinny! He jerked back when Keira's eyes snapped open

and, seeing the fright in them, hastened to explain his presence in her room. Still she eyed him suspiciously, recognizing Maurice as a member of Duval's crew. "I'm not hungry," she lied with a wave at the tray. "Take it away."

"You muss eat. You like stick, as Duval say."

"Get out!" Keira cried angrily, stung by the insult. "Stick or no stick, I want nothing from *him*."

Maurice regarded her helplessly. He was short and squat and very stooped. As was true of the other men who worked the canoes, the upper half of his body was exceedingly muscular through years of rowing, his skin deeply lined and the color of tobacco juice. He looked well over fifty, but in fact Maurice was only thirty-eight years old. He seemed ancient to Keira, like a villainous little monkey with his inquisitive black eyes and disproportionately long arms and huge hands. When he noticed her eyes constantly straying back to the tray, Maurice had an idea. Setting it down on a chair, he walked out of her room and closed the door.

"Damn Luc Duval!" she shouted after him.

There was a lovely scent about and Keira sat up in bed, her nostrils twitching, eyes drawn like a magnet to the tray he had left on a chair. Why should she starve herself to death just to spite him? she asked herself. He wouldn't care; he would probably rejoice!

She jumped off the bed and flew to the chair and proceeded to gobble down the meal, richer and more varied than anything she had ever eaten before. Raised on a diet that consisted mainly of oatmeal, kail soup, and tatties, or potatoes, with the occasional rabbit stew thrown in, Keira found the chicken she now consumed to be food fit for the gods. It was so moist and tender, with a delicious piquant sauce. The vegetables were fresh and crisp, the newly baked bread still warm from the oven. And there was cake! Sweet,

sticky cake with nuts on top studding the chocolate covering.

There wasn't a crumb left on the tray by the time Keira finished. The meal ended with her licking her fingers, then the plates. "A fine repast," she approved, thinking that her shrunken stomach wouldn't know what to make of such glorious fare.

She returned to the bed and lay down, turning her head from side to side to inspect the room. Could this really be all hers? she wondered, or would Duval boot her out to sleep in the yard now that he'd had a good close look at her? Oh, he had been disappointed in his "purchase," that was clear! "Serve's him right!" she muttered, still annoyed at the way he had insulted her.

She was allowed to keep the room to herself, which surprised Keira. Over the next few days Maurice or one of the other men brought her meals regularly, all varied and delicious, a far cry from the monotonous food she had eaten at home. She was given wine to drink and water to bathe with, and every afternoon was taken outside for exercise, always accompanied, of course, by two burly voyageurs. During these days in the Imperial Hotel Keira never actually saw Duval himself, and was thankful for that. But it did occur to her to wonder what he did with his time; the sort of work he did, if any; most of all, what he intended to do with her now that she'd failed to live up to his expectations.

She made a point of not speaking to his men, of holding herself aloof, but on the evening of the fourth day when Maurice brought her evening meal, Keira's curiosity got the better of her.

"I think I have a right to know what will be expected of me," she informed the little Frenchman. "What sort of work will I have to do?"

Maurice looked puzzled and scratched his chin. "Work? I not know any work."

"What does your master do for a living?"

Keira had noticed the voyageur's habit of cocking an ear and straining every time she opened her mouth, as if he were hard of hearing. Now, in response to her question, he said, "Pourriez-vous parler plus lentement?" And at Keira's blank expression, "You speak too quick. Say it slow."

Keira's primary language was Gaelic. She had been ten years old when the edict was sent up to Scotland from the south, saying that the Highland clans must cease and desist from speaking the language of

the rebel and learn the King's English instead. Naturally, the people saw it as one more form of oppression. Already they had been denied the right to hold arms, to wear their tartans and gather in secret conclaves, even to play their bagpipes and dance their jigs! But an order was an order, and there were always ways to get around it. They spoke English when they were forced to, but continued to use Gaelic amongst themselves.

Now, speaking *very* slowly, Keira repeated her question.

"Ah! Now I see." Maurice grinned and tapped his head, his face clearing. "Many exciting experience ahead for you, mademoiselle," he said, and proceeded to explain the nature of Duval's business and where they were going within a day or two. The news alarmed rather than excited Keira. It was bad enough to be in Luc Duval's power here, but at least they were in civilization and that alone put certain restraints on him since there were plenty of people around to observe his conduct. But once far away in the remote wilderness that Maurice spoke of . . .

"I don't want to go," Keira announced.

Maurice sighed. "I tell 'Duval what you say."

Whatever he told Duval seemed to make little impression on him, for the very next day another

voyageur brought a package to her room. "Clothes for travel," he said, and dropped the parcel into her arms. It was bulky and quite heavy. When Keira unwrapped it she found some strange attire indeed. There were two skirts made of leather, both with matching jackets. Also three blouses, boots, and something that looked like slippers but which she later discovered were known as moccasins. Folded neatly was an ell of white linen to be made into undergarments, and even a basic sewing kit.

Keira was flabbergasted, both by the fact that all these clothes were for her, and also by the type of clothes they were. She had never seen anything like them, and felt certain she'd be a laughing stock if she appeared in them in public.

Then she glanced down at her own things. Rags! Leaning closer to the pile on the bed, she examined the new outfits more carefully, fingering the soft, supple leather, examining the workmanship, which happened to be very fine. It came to her that, odd though they were,

the clothes must have been very expensive.

Suddenly she pushed them all away and flopped back on the bed, wondering at the strange new world she had come to, so very different from her own. She had never before owned anything brand new and certainly not bought in a store! Nor had she owned so many at the same time. Overwhelmed, Keira began to weep, thinking that nobody had ever given her a present before and it had to be him!

"Why are you still wearing that rag? Take it off at once and burn it."

Keira sat very erect in a chair by the window. Luc stood tensely just inside the door of her room. The package of clothes lay once more neatly wrapped on

the bed, as if ready to be mailed off somewhere.

"Don't they fit?" he queried. "I had to guess at the sizes."

She gave him a long, cool stare, one ripe with disapproval.

"I can't accept the gift," Keira told him flatly.

Luc gestured impatiently. "It's not a gift. These clothes are necessary for the journey we are about to undertake. They might look odd to you," he conceded, "but they are appropriate for the rugged terrain we'll be passing through." He could have added that they were the sort of garments that the wives and daughters of the fur barons wore when they ventured into the Northwest, and that they had been very expensive.

"Try them on," he urged, and walked to the bed and ripped the parcel open, plucked one of the skirts out of the bundle and held it out to Keira. "I'll turn my back," he said, grinning.

Keira found she had to steel herself against that lazy, coaxing smile and the way his deep voice took on a warm, persuasive cadence when he wanted something. She had always been receptive to beauty in any form, and even a one-eyed woman would have found Luc Duval attractive. But that only made him all the more dangerous! The time had come, she reckoned, to let him know that she wasn't quite as innocent and credulous as he seemed to think.

"A few days ago you made it clear that I didn't appeal to you," she said. "Then why are you trying to buy my favors?"

"I'm *not* trying to buy your favors!" Luc exploded, his tanned face flushing with exasperation and anger. "And you *still* don't appeal to me. I'd sooner have a flea-ridden hound in my bed."

He dropped the skirt and was beside her in three long strides, grasped her by the arms and plucked her

out of the chair and over to the bed, where he pointed at the parcel. "Put them on."

Keira shook her head, but she was beginning to get scared.

"No?" He quirked an eyebrow at her. Luc had no intention of fighting this headstrong female every step of the way. He thought of the long, dangerous trip ahead of them, a trip in which it was imperative that his crew follow orders and they all work as a team if they hoped to survive. There could only be one leader, and that leader was him, which Luc was determined to make clear.

Keira had barely started to shake her head again when he pounced on her, grasped her threadbare garment by the neck, and ripped it off her body. It was all done so quickly that she could only gasp and frantically try to cover her nakedness with her hands. Luc hauled her back to the bed, reached down for the clothes and thrust them at her. "Put them on!"

"Oh, God!" Clutching the things in front of her and cringing away from the dark wrath she saw in his eyes, terror, embarrassment, and fury boiling inside her at once, she screamed, "Evil beast!" at the same time backing away from him to the window where the swinging mirror stood on its mahogany frame. "You are no better than Lord Mathew! You"

Keira cried out again as she stumbled back into the cheval-glass, sending it tottering wildly to crash against the wall. Arms flailing, the new clothes flying in all directions, she tried desperately to save herself from falling. Duval, swearing in French, sprang forward and caught her arm. There was a moment when he felt her naked body in his arms, her skin cool and smooth, her long russet hair in his face. When Keira's head snapped up they looked at each other, and for an instant everything went still.

She saw his eyes move to her lips, became suddenly

conscious of his hardness against her, and knew what he was going to do.

But she was wrong. Luc firmly pushed her away from him. He stared at her thin frame and shook his head. "Bag of bones! For God's sake, cover them and get dressed. It hurts my eyes to look at you."

Keira watched the door slam shut behind him.

5

"I'm looking for a job," Keira told le directeur, or manager, of the Imperial Hotel, "and I'm willing to do anythinganything at all," she emphasized breathlessly, with a nervous glance over her shoulder down the hallway, expecting one of the voyageurs or even Luc-Duval himself to appear at any moment.

Once she had recovered from the shock of her confrontation with Duval, Keira was left with a choice: either she could go naked or wear the clothes he had bought for her. Pulling them on angrily, she had to accept that Duval had won the first roundoh, but she wasn't ready to concede *total* defeat just yet! The door of her room was never locked, but she was a prisoner just the same, since Luc kept at least one member of his crew stationed near the front desk at all times, to make sure she didn't slip away.

Once dressed in the strange new clothes, Keira had cautiously opened the door of her bedchamber a crack and for hours observed the activity going on at the

main desk of the hotel. She noted that Duval's men, or her guards, took turns in the lobby, and it seemed that there was no way out for her. Keira persisted, and midway through the afternoon a very young voyageur, a lad about her own age, changed places with one of the older men, and it wasn't very long before this youngster became bored with his task and wandered outside into the street, probably reasoning, Keira surmised, that he was still doing his duty since she couldn't leave the building without him seeing her.

She had made a dash then into the foyer, where Monsieur Gauthier was going through ledgers at the desk. She had often seen Gauthier, a man old enough to be her father, watching her during the times when she passed through the lobby on her way out for exercise, and once or twice he'd smiled. He seemed like a pleasant old man to Keirashe

reckoned him to be about fifty and now he listened attentively as she expressed her desire for work. "I'm willing to scrub floors, wash linen, or whatever else you might want me to do."

Gauthier was puzzled. He knew the young lady was somehow attached to Luc Duval, though she had come on the scene but lately. Not certain of her exact connection to the fur merchant, he inquired cautiously, "Then you plan to stay on in Montreal, mademoiselle? You are not going with Monsieur Duval when he leaves?"

"No." Keira shook her head firmly. "But I must find work immediately."

Gauthier threw a furtive glance up and down the hallway, but it was the quiet time of the afternoon and nobody was about. His eyes returned to the girl with keen interest, and at the same time he felt something dark and exciting spring up inside him, feelings he had tried to quell. Gauthier had only recently been hired to manage the Imperial Hotel. Before that he

had been assistant manager at the Grand, but there was more prestige in attaining the secondary post at the Grand than in being le directeur at the Imperial. He had left his former employment suddenly and in some disgrace, but it had been hushed up to avoid bad publicity not that his fat, dominating wife ever allowed him to forget it for an instant, the nagging cow!

He examined the girl leaning anxiously over the counter, her sparkling gray eyes fixed imploringly on his face. Gauthier estimated her to be about fifteen years old and wondered if she was a virgin. He sensed that she was, because she had that certain untouched freshness about her, a sweet innocence in her expression. And best of all, she had the spare, loose-jointed figure of a young boy.

"I *might* be able to help you," the manager told her in a near whisper, casting another surreptitious glance around, but first he had to find out about Luc Duval. That had to be sorted out.

"You are related to Monsieur Duval?" he inquired, stroking his chin, at the same time beginning to get stirring mental images of the type of work he would have the young beauty do for him, and it didn't include waiting on tables.

"No, we are not related," Keira replied, her face flushing with hope and excitement as she sensed that the manager was going to help her; she could see it in his eyes. "I'm only staying with him," she lied, "until

I can find work."

"Wrong!" a deep voice contradicted, and Luc Duval stepped into view from a bend in the corridor where he had been listening to their conversation.

Both Keira and the manager gave a start, a guilty start, and Gauthier immediately began to apologize, babbling that Keira had come pleading to him for a job, swearing that he, Duval, wouldn't mind.

Luc cut short the manager's anxious explanation by grasping Keira by the arm and hauling her into the hotel dining room, almost empty at that time of day. He seated her firmly in a chair by the window and leaned across the table intently, fixing her with hard, angry eyes. "What are you up to, eh? Trying to seduce Monsieur Gauthier into giving you work? Did I not make it clear to you what happens to people who break their bonds?"

Keira had an impulse to slap the arrogant face, and hastily dropped both hands beneath the tablecloth, clenching them tightly together. To counter anger with anger never worked, she knew, and would get her nowhere with this determined, volatile man. Difficult as it was, she struggled to calm herself, remembering that she had almost persuaded Gauthier to accede to her wishes and, if she handled it right, she might have similar success with Duval.

Fixing an earnest expression on her face, she said, "I don't want to be a bother to you, really I don't, and" she practically had to choke her next words out "I'm sorry if I've been troublesome. But you admitted yourself that you don't have any work for me to do"

"I didn't admit anything of the kind," Luc contradicted. "What I said was that I had still to decide the type of work I wanted you to do for me." He was surprised and pleased at her pleasanter attitude, even though he suspected that she was being nice for a reason. The girl amused him, yes, even while she exasperated him. She was so incredibly innocent and naive, and so mistaken if she imagined that she could manipulate him. Luc had met every kind of individual, all sorts of characters in his line of work, and wasn't easily taken in. But he decided to go along with Keira just to see what would happen.

Now her beautiful gray eyes with their curling dark lashes were riveted earnestly on his face, the first time she had looked at him so directly. Suspicious as Luc was of her motives, he felt the strong

impact of the girl's appeal and found that he had to harden himself against it.

"Maurice told me the kind of work you do," she said, "and where you go to do it, and truly . . . truly I cannot see where I would fit in. I feel I would only be a burden to you."

Duval smiled sardonically. "You worry too much about me, mademoiselle."

Keira missed the sarcasm in his tone and hurried on. "Let me stay here and I'll work to pay off my bond. I swear, I'll work very hard and pay you back every penny." At his skeptical look she added with a tremor in her voice, "If you don't trust me, we can arrange to have the hotel manager hold back part of my wages, and he can give it to you the next time you come to Montreal," she suggested hopefully.

He chuckled. "I don't trust Gauthier either." Especially not now, Luc thought privately.

Keira took a deep, steadying breath. "I would be so grateful to you if you would let me stay here." Her hand reached out and touched his, then drew back immediately. She admitted, "I don't want to go to that wilderness place Maurice told me about. I'd like to stay in Montreal and make a new life for myself here." There! Keira thought anxiously, she had been perfectly frank with him, perfectly honest about her feelings, not an easy thing for her to do with a stranger. And she had thrown herself on his mercy, something that came even harder to her, proud and distrustful as she was. Keira held her breath.

"Have you forgotten Seth Bratchy?" he asked quietly.

Bratchy! Always Bratchy! How could she be sure the trapper really was such a beast? She had only Duval's word for that.

"He must be very far away from here by now," she replied, but Keira felt her control begin to crumble at his continued resistance, and a sharpness had entered her voice. "Will you let me stay?"

"No."

Luc knew Bratchy's habits much better than she did, but he was weary of explaining that to her and wouldn't again. Keira MacKenzie was the most exasperating, the most stubborn, unfriendly female he had ever encountered. And her reasonable attitude *had* been a sham. She was

glaring at him now, pure, undistilled resentment perhaps even hatred in her luminous gray eyes. Never had a woman looked at him like that! Luc couldn't understand it, and her manner irked him. He had risked his life for the ungrateful wench, yes, and paid Frew a large sum for her bond! Aside from that, he had been good to her in the short time she had been with him. What had made her the way she was?

"Who is Lord Mathew?" Duval asked her unexpectedly.

Keira blinked at him, caught unprepared. His question brought back the embarrassing scene earlier in her room, when she had accused him of being no better than the heir to Strathvagan. For a minute she wasn't going to answer, then she said bitterly, "He is a man much like you, rich, powerful, and with a heart like stone." Suddenly tears came to her eyes. "And he thinks that his position in life gives him the right to destroy those less fortunate than he is."

Ah . . . that made things a little clearer, thought Luc. "He was your lover and spurned you?"

Keira almost choked. Her face turned bright pink and her eyes filled with loathing. "Don't be daft! I hate

the man and all his ilk. Could I love a man who ruined my family?"

She broke down then, covering her face with her hands, and began to sob convulsively, her whole body shaking with the force of her grief. When Luc reached out to touch her, Keira jerked away, then jumped to her feet and flew back to her room, leaving him sitting alone in the dining room.

He gazed after her, his face sober, not sure whether to believe her or not, remembering her clumsy attempt to manipulate him just moments ago. But if it was the truth if some nobleman *had* ruined her family, then he felt deeply sorry for the girl. But there was nothing he could do! Duval saw that clearly. She wouldn't be comforted or even let another man near her. Even Maurice and one or two of the other voyageurs had remarked on her hostility, her icy aloofness; she had surrounded herself with an impenetrable barrier of hatred, and nothing and no one could get through.

With a sigh Luc lit a cigar and considered the weighty responsibility he had so rashly taken on, something he could well have done without. *Should* he allow her to stay on in Montreal since she seemed to want to so badly, making no bones about the fact that she resented

any hold a male might have over her? Should he leave her to fend for herself, to take her chances? People learned best through their own mistakes, Luc reminded himself, and perhaps she was more capable and resourceful than he'd thought. After all, she had gotten herself this far.

It was tempting, very tempting. Cut her out of his life and tear up her bond. He had enough to contend with in the wilds without having to fight Keira MacKenzie and suffer her animosity every step of the way and not because of anything *he* had done to her.

Luc rose abruptly and walked out to the desk to

have a word with Monsieur Gauthier, and soon afterwards Gauthier left the hotel and scurried gleefully to a property dealer with whom he'd done business years ago. Yes, yes, Gauthier nodded at the very first tiny apartment he was shown, it would suit the purpose splendidly.

The dealer wrung Gauthier's hand, his eyes knowing, and heartily congratulated him, thinking, "There's life in the old dog yet!"

Keira could not believe it when Luc Duval entered her room at the Imperial to say that she was free to remain in Montreal. At first she suspected a trick of some sort, then he said, "You must be very, very careful here."

Luc pulled some silver out of his pocket and set it down on a table. "This will keep you until you receive your first wage."

It was true! Keira thought, her heart leaping. He was letting her go!

Something strange and altogether unexpected happened to her then. Keira wondered if she'd misjudged Duval, if he was as bad as she'd thought after all. She could not conceive of the Strathvagans, for instance, behaving so benevolently. Had she been wrong to lump all rich and powerful people together?

She rose from her chair and crossed the room to stand beside him, and his physical appearance struck her much more forcefully now, his height and the width of his shoulders, the deep glow in his eyes, the strength of his features. He was a fine-looking man, as her mother might have put it. Yes, she saw that clearly now. She also felt that he wasn't unkind.

They looked at each other in silence for a moment, and in that silence many things happened in Keira's mind and with her emotions. It was as if everything had been tipped upside-down.

"I hope you'll be happy in Montreal," he said.

"I'll work hard and pay you back every penny, I promise," Keira told him feelingly.

Luc shook his head, smiling slightly at her earnestness, but he sensed a difference in her manner, even in the way she looked at him. There were so many things he wanted to warn her about, for he *still* felt that she was innocent and vulnerable, but what was the point? She would probably resent that too, he told himself, and shrugged inwardly.

Suddenly Keira thrust out her hand. Luc glanced at it, then at her face, and surprised her by drawing her close to him for a moment and kissing her on the forehead.

"All men are not like Lord Mathew," he said, and dropped his hands from her shoulders and left the room.

And that was that! Keira thought with a sigh, trying to sort out the weird mixture of emotions tumbling about inside her. He had decided he wanted to be rid of her after all, so she had won in the end. "Good!" she said aloud. "Now I'm free to do exactly what I want." Her calm, reasonable attitude had paid great dividends.

The hired coach rattled through the streets of Montreal at dusk, carrying Keira away from Luc Duval and his crew of voyageurs, and soon the Imperial Hotel too had vanished behind them. It was only then that Monsieur Gauthier was able to relax. He turned eagerly to the girl seated beside him and smiled, exposing crooked yellow teeth and a goodly expanse of gums, gums that were bloodless, like dead meat.

He put a paternal hand on her knee, a helpless groan welling up in his throat as he studied the lovely young face beside him. "You are not afraid, are you, my dear?"

Keira shook her head, but she was frightened a little, thinking that she was all alone again in a strange country and would now have to fend for herself which of course was just what she wanted. Just the same, it was a sobering thought and natural, she supposed, that she should feel

a little nervous. Keira had been surprised when the manager hurried her out of the hotel so hastily, saying that he would explain everything later.

"Where are we going, sir?" she asked him with a glance out the window. "I thought I would be living at the hotel."

"No," he said, "that is impossible. You see, the rooms there must be filled with *paying* guests, and Monsieur Duval refused to pay for you to stay there any longer," he lied. "He seemed quite anxious for you to leave immediately."

Well he would, Keira reflected cynically. Her father used to say that a clever gambler always knew when to cut his losses.

Gauthier explained that the hotel staff lived in accommodations close by, but her new lodgings actually seemed far away to Keira, and they were in a poorer section of town. Still, she thought philosophically, servants could hardly expect their employers to put them up in style. Her few days of luxury at the Imperial had spoiled her, and she realized that things would be rather different from now on.

The building the coachman pulled up to was quite shabby, she noticed, with paint peeling off its clapboards and most of its shutters gone. A faded sign hung on a rusted chain over the entrance, and the tiny foyer was dark and musty. A swarthy youth appeared and carried Keira's few belongings up to a room on the third floor. Outside the door he handed Gauthier the key, at the same time giving Keira a sly, sidelong smile. The manager rebuked him sharply in French,

then turned to Keira, shaking his head. "No manners, no manners at all. Boys today!" He threw up his hands in disgust.

She had to smile, thinking that he sounded just like her father. Gauthier, not a very tall man, was compact and trim, with a narrow sallow face and small, deepset brown eyes. He had bushy brows, and tufts of hair sprouted from his nostrils. His hands too, she noticed as she watched him unlock the door, were covered with a mat of springy black hair.

"Enter, please." He waved her into the room ahead of him. It had almost no furniture other than a lumpy bed in one corner, and didn't seem any too clean. There was an odor that caused Keira's stomach to tighten up and made her think of moldy vegetables.

She turned when she heard Gauthier close and then lock the door behind them, and watched him drop the key into his vest pocket. He looked about and, finding no chairs in the room, sat down somewhat gingerly on the bed and patted the place beside him. "Kindly be seated. This won't take long."

It was quiet in the room and dim, thanks to the dirt smearing its single window. The street sounds seemed far away up here on the third floor, and the heat and lack of air in the room made Keira's skin feel suddenly clammy under her clothes. Of course she was nervous too, anxious to make a favorable impression on the manager. She desperately needed the job! She had taken with her the clothes Duval had bought her for the simple reason that she would have gone naked otherwise, but she had left his money behind at the Imperial, still on the table where he had set it down. Oh yes, she thought, swallowing anxiously, she must get the job. How could she live otherwise?

Monsieur Gauthier turned to her gravely. "You must not take offense if I seem to pry," he began, hardly able to conceal his excitement at finally finding

himself cloistered alone with her at a safe distance from the Imperial. He had been desperate to get her away from the hotel to a place where he could keep her until Luc Duval left town. He didn't quite trust Duval, not even after the merchant had come to him and announced that Mademoiselle MacKenzie could stay and work for him after all. "You *will* give her a job? I won't leave her otherwise," Duval had made clear. Gauthier had promised to employ her something the girl didn't know. After that was settled, Duval had ordered, "Treat her well. Remember, I'll be back here next year." It had sounded to Gauthier like a threat.

"Where are your family?" Gauthier asked the girl now, and in minutes had the whole sad story out of Keira, thereby ascertaining that she was completely alone in Canada. And no, she had never been married. Keira, he noted, seemed startled at the question, leading him to inquire, "And your age, my dear?"

Then came a question that had Keira blushing to the roots of her auburn hair. Gauthier led into it by pointing out, "The Imperial Hotel has an impeccable reputation, you understand? We have to be most careful about the type of people we employ. They must be honest, that goes without saying, but they must also be clean in their habits. Promiscuity, for instance, will not be tolerated." Leaning closer, he

asked her bluntly, "Are you chaste?"

Keira dropped her eyes to her hands, and nodded, and with that Gauthier cunningly changed the subject and brought it back around to her family again; he had noticed her great stress when she spoke about them. He took her hands in his and squeezed them sympathetically, his expression suitably mournful. "My heart bleeds for you, my dear. To lose your entire family on Dieu, what a shock! And now . . . now you have no one. How cruel life can be!"

As he commiserated with Keira he moved a little closer and put an arm around her shoulders when he saw tears well into her eyes. His warmth and sympathy, the first offered her since the tragedy, disarmed Keira and lulled any misgivings she might have had. Gauthier seemed old to her; he was even older than her father had been at the time he died, and it was a vast relief to finally have a shoulder to cry on. She hardly noticed when the hotel manager took her all the way into his arms, crooning soothingly, patting her heaving back.

He could barely restrain a groan at the feel of her slender body against him, and lowered his face into her hair with a sigh of relish. It smelled so clean and was so fine and silky, like a child's. His penchant for children had cost him two previous jobs, but this girl, he told himself, this girl was beyond the danger age. And she was alone in the country.

Bolder now, Gauthier lifted Keira onto his lap. When she raised her head, frowning, he smiled and said, "Don't be afraid, I want to help you. We all need someone to cling to now and then." Stroking the tears from her cheeks, the stubby hair on the back's of his fingers tickling her skin, he went on in the same low, mesmerizing way. "It would be a sad world if we couldn't bring each other comfort, would it not? It's quite natural."

Still smiling, his eyes dropped to her jacket. "It's warm in here. Why don't you take that off and be more comfortable?"

Impatient now, his hands trembling a little, Gauthier took the jacket by the lapels and, pushing and tugging it over her shoulders and down her arms, removed it for her and let it fall to the floor behind her. Keira stared at him and saw that his skin was blotched with florid color; that there were beads of sweat dotting his face; that his eyes seemed glazed and

feverish. Then she felt his hands glide up under her blouse to her bare back, his fingers crawling around crablike to her ribs, then up to cover her breast. His thumb touched her nipple, began to rub back and forth. "Do you like that?" His voice was like treacle.

Keira gave a violent start that almost sent her off his knee, Instantly Gauthier dropped his hands from her breasts and plunged them up under her skirt to fasten on her buttocks, his fingers biting deep into her flesh as he wrenched her down hard against his groin. Panting, he began making quick, desperate jabbing thrusts with his hips, and Keira felt the rising bulge of him grinding up against her.

He had caught her completely off guard, and for those first few seconds Keira was too stunned to react, to know what to do. Taking advantage of her surprise, Gauthier darted forward, snakelike, and kissed her on the lips, forcing his hot tongue deep into her mouth. Gagging, Keira tried to jerk back from him, and it was then she discovered that the hotel manager was not the feeble old man that she'd taken him for. He was strong, far stronger than he looked, and he was determined. "Be still! Let me show you . . ."

He was trembling and sweating with lust, much too aroused now to worry about whether he was hurting her or not. "Don't . . . move," he gasped, clutching her against him. "You want the job then be sensible. Wait!" he took one hand away from her hips and slipped it between her parted legs, a finger probing, exploring, beginning to hurt her as he found the place he sought. Keira went rigid, then cried, "Don't! Mr. *Gauthier*"

"A moment, a moment, let me see . . ." he began massaging her rapidly. "I make you want it, make you crave what I have for you. I teach you. . . . ah . . ."

Keira screamed and lashed out at his contorted face, beating him about the head and shoulders with

her clenched fists. He ducked, lost his balance and fell back on the bed, and she was off him in a flash. "You vile, filthy old goat!" she cried at him, remembering that he still had the key to the room. "Let me out of here! Dear God, you are old enough to be my grandfather."

Keira turned to hunt for a weapon when the door burst open and several men barged into the room. "I thought so!" Duval snarled. He struck Gauthier a stunning blow across the face when the older man began to rise from the bed, whimpering that Keira had encouraged

him. Then Duval wheeled to face the girl herself.

"Did he hurt you?"

She knew what he meant and shook her head.

"You will leave Montreal with us tomorrow." His face was tight with fury. Then he flung at her, "And I hope this experience has taught you something."

It had. That even *old* men couldn't be trusted.

6

They left Montreal at seven o'clock the next morning, not by canoe but with Luc, Keira, and Maurice on saddle horses and the rest of the crew on foot. Keira soon saw why the canoes would have been useless on that first short leg of their mammoth journey west. She had just been thinking that the scenery about them was really quite tame and not at all as rugged and bleak as the Scottish Highlands, when she heard a dull roar from up ahead, and, rounding a bend in the dirt trail, they came upon the boiling cauldron of the Lachine Rapids.

Keira, perched stiffly in front of Luc in the saddle, gazed at the river in awe. The very ground seemed, to shift uneasily underfoot, and the men had to shout to be heard over the thundering force of the water. The eleven voyageurs loping along the hard-packed earthen trail behind them seemed in fine spirits and passed the time chatting and joking in French. Though Keira had no idea what they were saying, she found their

laughter and light-hearted mood infectious, and now and then a smile tugged at the corners of her mouth and eased the depression she was feeling at moving yet farther away from her homeland and closer to the great unknown.

Both Luc Duval and his crew looked much different today. Duval had discarded his smart tailored suits and the voyageurs their flamboyant "city" attire in favor of more rugged outfits, much of it made of leather, though Keira noticed that the men still wore the bright red sashes around their waists, and a few continued to sport their city hats, all colorful and different. After weeks spent in drinking, dicing, and visiting every brothel in town, the men seemed quite happy to be leaving Montreal.

Not so Keira. Unlike them, she had no idea what lay in store for her, other than that they were bound for a distant, little-known territory where few white men had ever been, a tractless wasteland full of mystery and danger, her only companions foreigners and strangers who spoke a language she couldn't understand.

Duval had not troubled himself to explain anything or try to set her mind at ease, but then why should he, Keira thought dourly. It was the rare master who bothered to explain his business to a servant to a slave! Once he'd issued the command that she would go with them after all, he seemed to feel that was enough and had hardly spoken to her since.

Keira sensed that he was angry with her, annoyed at all the trouble she had caused him. Also that he was more than ever regretting the "purchase" he had made at the sale, but since he had spent so much for her bond, was now determined to get *some* use out of her. What that would be Keira couldn't imagine, but it only added to the vast uncertainty eating away at her as they rode along, every mile they traveled making

her feel more vulnerable and helpless, and more in the power of the man sitting behind her, his thighs gripping her like a vice.

Then he said something astonishing, something that had Keira's heart bursting with hope. "You'll find many of your countrymen in Lachine. It was a Scotsman by the name of Simon McTavish who started the North West Company and set up in opposition to the people at Hudson Bay."

Keira was too overwhelmed by relief to respond.

Lachine, gateway to the West, turned out to be a bustling place full of men engaged in the fur trade. It was by and large a company town geared to the business of the North West Fur Company, a confusing mixture of rickety wooden buildings, stores and taverns, boardinghouses and restaurants, and above all the dozens of huge sheds and warehouses for storing the supplies and temporarily housing the pelts brought back from the hinterland until they could be sent on to Montreal and London. Most of the houses Keira saw as they rode into town were scarcely better than hovels, but there were a few grand ones too, some of them built of brick as back home in Scotland, with real glass in the windows and spacious verandas with well-tended gardens stretching out in front. Catching her looking at them,

Luc explained, "These belong to the bourgeois, the partners in the North West Company. They believe in living in style even in a frontier outpost like Lachine."

"Andand you say they are Scottish?" There was a tremor in her voice.

"Oui," Luc nodded, smiling, "and they speak just like you, though perhaps not so strong an accent, but then most of them have been here longer."

He turned the horse's head away from the track they had been following and started down a long slope.

Keira could see a river gleaming in the distance, where it seemed that some sort of carnival or celebration was taking place on its banks, from the size of the crowd gathered there. As she drew closer, Keira's heart lightened at the sight of small children darting about at play, and groups of people lounging on the grass enjoying picnics in the warm spring sunshine. The river itself was abustle with various trading brigades preparing to leave, their crews busily loading the garishly painted freight canoes. All the activity went on under the approving eyes of the bourgeois, the partners in the North West Fur Company.

Duval laughed at Keira's astonishment. With a wave to the river bank, he said, "This sort of thing has been going on for years. They'll seize at any excuse for a celebration. When I was a boy living in Lachine I came down here regularly to watch the brigades setting out and join in the fun." Then he made a confession. "I always knew that one day I would be going with them."

Keira turned slightly in the saddle. "You lived in Lachine? But I thought . . . I thought you were from France."

"My *people* were from France, but I was born here in Lachine, which makes me a Canadian," he told her with pride evident in his voice. "Many from France came to this country in years gone by to escape oppression, or with the hope of doing better for themselves." He looked at her profile, adding, "Not unlike some of the Scots, I gather. Like the French, many of them have done very well here."

He nudged the horse forward and they picked their way downhill to the banks of the river, Keira leaning forward expectantly, her eyes bright and alert, her heart surging and emotions overflowing when lilting Scottish voices drifted to her on the wind. When Duval pulled

up under a tree, she slid off the horse

without waiting for assistance and stumbled, her eyes blinded with tears, to the nearest group of picnickers sprawled contentedly and rather tipsily on the grass. The three men and three women reclining on thick wool blankets, with a veritable banquet of rich food and fine wine spread out on a white linen cloth before them, looked up in surprise when Keira staggered into their midst. They could see at once that the girl was in a great state of agitation.

Luc and his voyageurs watched her from a little distance.

"You should stop her," Maurice said, catching Duval's arm, but Luc shook his head, murmuring, "Wait . . ."

Keira had made an unfortunate choice in selecting that particular group of picnickers. Two of the men were senior partners in the North West Fur Company and very conscious of their position. They had come to Canada years ago with nothing, but subsequently they had prospered beyond their wildest hopes and were not anxious to be reminded of their humble roots. Where once they had been mere vassals of their clan chief, in Canada *they* were the chiefs and long used to being in a position of authority. They resented any intrusion into their circle without an invitation, and a class system had evolved among them that was every bit as rigid and unbending as the old system at home. They were the bourgeois, the partners and directors of an industry that covered more territory than any other on earth, and brought in enormous wealth that was destined to make Canada great. Such men were quite content to live in the present and forget the past, so they frowned when Keira cried out in Gaelic, "Whereabouts in Scotland are you from? I'm from Strathvagan myself, lately driven out by my clan chief. My family perished during the evictions and the journey over here, and . . ."

They stared at her in silence as Keira rattled on, and even in her highly emotional state she sensed the coolness of their reception, though the three men examined her keenly enough, even as their wives gazed at her frostily. She could not know that these women, while enjoying a life of luxury in their homes at Mount Royal in Montreal, rarely enjoyed the security and fidelity of their husbands' affections, or indeed much of their time. The farthest the wives of the partners usually ventured into the wilderness was Lachine, but their men frequently had reason to visit the distant trading forts and

factories, which often kept them away from home for a year or two at a time. During these long absences from Montreal their husbands frequently availed themselves of "country" wives from among the Indian tribes in the area, and fathered whole broods of mixed-blood children. Inevitably news of it filtered back to their legal spouses at home, with mixed results. Many women refused to tolerate it and ended the marriage, but most put up with it, unwilling to give up the life of ease and plenty they'd become accustomed to, and stoically turned a blind eye to their mate's unfaithfulness, reasoning that the Indian women were not a lasting threat. Their men would abandon them in the end when they returned to civilization.

A much greater threat to the wives of the fur traders was the appearance of a single *European* woman coming on the scene, the more so if that woman also happened to be young and beautiful. Through narrowed eyes they examined Keira and listened to her spill out her story of how she'd been driven from her home, forced to indenture herself to an unscrupulous sea captain who proceeded to sell off her bond to Luc Duval a man they all knew and respected. When the girl expressed a strong desire to remain among her own people rather than venture into the wilderness

with a foreigner, alarm bells clanged in the heads of the ladies watching her.

The oldest of the women addressed Keira sharply. "You will be thrown into prison if you break your bond. and remember, we are *all* foreigners here. Be glad of Monsieur Duval's protection, young lady, and return to him at once."

"Aye," one of the men mumbled, feeling his wife's hard stare, "you'd do well to forget the past and make the best of what you have now. You could do a lot worse than have Luc Duval for a master."

Crushed, for she had been so sure they would help her, Keira stared at them all in their fine clothes, then at the feast spread out on the grass before them, and she choked, "You are not Scottish at all! You"

"Run along, girl," one of the women said, and waved her off as if brushing a fly from the food. "We came here to have a merry time and now you've spoiled it for us with your sniveling."

Keira wandered from group to group, a little of her hope chipped away at each fresh encounter. Some of the people were kind enough to her, they offered her wine and food, even invited her to sit among

them but none offered to take her in, as they would have done back in Scotland, or give her work, or in any way help her to free herself from her new "master."

Finally, in despair, Keira went off by herself and sat down on the river bank, gazing bleakly at the men loading the canoes. Soon it could be tomorrow, for all she knew she would be in one of those canoes, and this very river would whisk her away, far away to a life in the wilds of North America, aye, whether she wanted to go or not. It had all been taken out of her hands. Here she was surrounded by Highlanders, her own people, with even a piper winding his way between the groups playing the music she knew so well, yet even in this crowd of her countrymen nobody

would lift a finger to help her. They might have been Scottish, but they were not like the Scots back home, Keira thought bitterly. Prosperity had spoiled them; it was as if they had been smitten with the same disease that had afflicted the clan chiefs, and they were no better than strangers.

Keira had never felt so isolated and alone in her life.

"Well, have you had enough?" a deep voice queried.

She didn't have to raise her head to know that it was Luc Duval. Ironically, he was the only constant in her life now, like it or not. It was strange, Keira thought, that every attempt she had made to strike out for herself always brought her back to him. Fate, she sighed. 'Tis fate.

"Aye," she admitted, "I've had enough."

"Come, then" he reached down and took her arm and pulled her to her feet "you'll catch a chill sitting there on the bare ground."

Then she was standing beside him. Their eyes met. Something happened then, something that Keira could never have explained. She felt a little inward shock, then the shouts and laughter of the children playing about them ebbed away. The piper and his music became distant, even the gurgling of the river grew muted. She looked in his deep brown eyes, and for the few seconds they stood there Keira was conscious of nothing but Luc Duval, the man fate had tied her to, and from whom she couldn't break free, and she knew then that she wouldn't try to run away again.

Keira was surprised to find Duval's crew making camp on the riverbank.

"We tired of hotels," Maurice told her, hammering a pole into the recently thawed earth. "Better to live natural, with nature."

She watched them pitch two tents, one for her and the other for Luc. The men themselves, a crew destined to swell to thirty-six before they left Lachine, settled happily to sleep at night beneath their upturned canoes.

Once the camp was prepared, the youngest voyageur, François, fetched a bucket of water from the river and set it to boil over the fire, then carried it into the smaller of the two tents so that Keira could bathe in private. "A moment, please," the boy said, smiling shyly when he had emptied the steaming water into a large metal tub. "I go now, but I be back."

When he returned, François had a large, fluffy towel over his arm which he handed to her, blushing. Then

he dug a hand into his pocket and brought out a bar of soap. "From Monsieur," he said, and pressed it into her hand.

Keira nodded. Once the youth had left, she closed and laced the flap of her tent and took off her clothes, then stepped into the tin bath and with a relishing sigh lowered herself into the warm water. She was a little disappointed to discover that Duval's soap was totally devoid of perfume, but washed herself vigorously with it nevertheless, then dried herself off on his plain white towel. Soap and towels had been luxuries at home in Radmuir, plain or otherwise. The clan usually bathed in rivers and lochs using sand or gravel for soap and bunches of grass or the air itself to dry them. Occasionally, when they had time, Keira's mother and grandmother had made real soap or something very like it out of hard fat from the sheep or cows mixed with dried flowers and herbs. On rare occasions they had made candles too, and Keira had helped them. They had chatted about the latest gossip while they worked, and often they had sung songs. Her mother had had a sweet voice, thin but clear.

Tears gushed into Keira's eyes at the memory, and she threw herself down on the mattress she'd been provided with and drew a blanket over her, even over her head. Scrunched up there, her knees almost to

her chin, her face muffled by the cover, she sobbed brokenly as first one, then another aching memory filled her mind: the family all working together, each busy with their own specific tasks, then joining the rest of the villagers at a ceilidh when the hard work was done, to dance and sing and share what food they had, most of all to reinforce the ties that had linked the clan for centuries. Keira thought of the misty summer mornings when she had sometimes joined her father and Gavin in driving the cattle up to the high pastures in the mountains, the air sweet as

sugared wine. And at sunset, in the pink gloaming, the hills and valleys purple and mauve, peat smoke in the air, the young lovers would walk hand in hand through the heather and whisper secrets to each other and make plans.

Suddenly Keira thought of Thomas Kennedy, the miller's son, the boy she would have married had she been able to stay in Strathvagan. It struck her with a pang that she'd hardly thought of Tam these past few months, and she felt terribly guilty. An image of him rose in her mind now, a lanky boy with a mop of red hair and a smiling face covered with freckles, a shy lad who had only kissed her once, quickly, furtively, on the lips and immediately apologized for taking liberties even though they were to be married.

Luc Duval could have learned a lot from Tam, Keira thought darkly. She could not imagine *him* ever apologizing for anything!

"Tam," she wailed. "Dear Tam. Whatever happened to you?"

Keira knew she would never see him again. Everyone she'd loved had been taken away. The villages of Strathvagan were silent now, the valleys empty, and even if she wept an ocean of tears and could somehow ride homeward on a tide of grief . . . there was nothing left to return to.

Eventually she fell asleep.

Keira awoke two hours later feeling refreshed and calmer than she had for months. Her mind was steady and clear, her mood quietly stoic. She sat up in bed, thinking, North America! Surely it was a most unlikely place for a lass from the Highlands of Scotland to be calling home, and Luc Duval and his team of voyageurs an even *more* unlikely clan. But Keira squared her shoulders that seemed to be the way of things, the twists and turns of fortune ever a fickle thing. Now

that she was stuck with it, she could only go on and see where this new life led her. And, she told herself firmly, she would not be afraid.

As they sat in a circle around a roaring campfire eating their evening meal of roast venison and wild turkey, the voyageurs were far more subdued than usual. Now and then eyes slid sidelong in Keira's direction as the crew tried to assess her mood following the cool reception she had received from her own countrymen. When they noticed her eating with as much gusto as the rest of them, their spirits rose a little, and when she accepted the bottle passed to her by the bashful François, tilted it to her mouth, and took a man-size swallow, they relaxed even more. At the end of the meal, one-eyed Henri picked up his battered violin and asked if she had a request. Keira thought of all the lovely Scottish melodies, then shook her head. Henri immediately launched into a merry tune calculated to lighten the atmosphere still further, and suddenly, to their utter amazement and delight, Keira leapt to her feet and threw herself into a wild, spirited jig, easily keeping time to the unfamiliar music as if she had danced to it every day of her life. There was a moment of stunned silence when everybody stared and nobody moved, when they tried to follow the quick, intricate steps she matched to the tune, her slender body supple and graceful and light as thistledown, her feet flying faster and faster as the beat pounded in her blood. And there was something so unrestrained in her movements, so joyously abandoned, that the men suddenly snapped out of their trance and began to clap and cheer.

From his place on the other side of the campfire Luc had watched Keira all through the meal, like his men trying to gauge her feelings now that her own country-

men had seemed disinclined to come to her aid. He was as startled as they were when she sprang to her feet and launched into the dance, taken aback by the unexpected facet of her personality that was revealed to him and the abrupt change in her demeanor. Smoking a cigar, his back propped against a tree, Duval observed her closely. She had a wonderful sense of rhythm, he saw, his own blood quickening at the sight of her, and an instinctive feeling for drama; there wasn't an eye around not riveted to her, enthralled. Hearing the cheers and applause and the wild, wanton music, people from all up and down the river began to stream into their campsite.

One-eyed Henri's homely face split into a wide grin; he sawed his instrument with even more enthusiasm as Keira began to spin and whirl around the perimeter of the fire, leaping, dipping, her skirt

billowing and hair flying, and each time she sped past him she gave Luc a bold, challenging smile as if to say, "Now who is in charge here?"

A big crowd gathered about them, most of them Scottish, and they certainly knew what this was all about and entered into the spirit of the Highland ceilidh with uninhibited relish. Strong drink was passed along from hand to hand, and in minutes the "floor" was crowded with other dancers, and never had the few women present been as much in demand in their lives.

Luc heard Keira laugh shrilly as a strapping redbearded Scotsman swept her into his arms. His dark eyes narrowed as he watched them whirl and spin, come together and then spring apart, the campfire setting Keira's long auburn hair ablaze as it streamed out behind her and the heat and exertion of the dance itself flaming in her cheeks. Their quiet evening meal, thought Duval, had turned into a pagan celebration.

The girl had taken control of the menthe camp itself with an ease that astounded him. And yes, he thought wryly, she had made them love every minute of it!

Suddenly Luc laughed aloud and got to his feet, thinking that there was far more to the innocent little Highland wench than he had imagined. He strode into the thick of the dancers and tapped the shoulder of the fur trader who held Keira in his arms, only one of many she had danced with, and he said, "This one is mine," not sure whether he meant the dance or the girl.

Many camps were strung out along the river, all with their campfires flaring up into the darkness, and much visiting between them; even a stranger was rarely turned away but was asked to share the food and wine and sometimes even given a bed for the night. There was a general air of camaraderie among the men engaged in the fur trade, even though sudden, fierce fights often erupted between them, violent, bloody brawls settled with knives and hatchets as well as fists, and the men bore the scars to prove it. They had their rivalries; some made lasting enemies, but their *real* rivals the competitors out to steal their trade and take the bread from their mouths were far away in Hudson Bay, and for the moment they could forget them.

The majority of the people in Lachine were employed by the North West Fur Company, though there were some smaller independent firms too like Duval. Then there were the loners, the individual

trappers, men who spent months or years roaming the vast Northwest on their own, or on occasion joining up with one or two others like themselves for varying lengths of time, usually until they had a falling out as

their suspicious natures suspected some plot hatching against them, and at that point they would fight and split up.

Three such men sat drinking around a small fire about a quarter of a mile upriver from Luc Duval's camp. All three were seasoned veterans of the wilds, and the two oldest had been together for the past several months. They had met up in the far north where both had trap lines, then had traveled back to Montreal together to sell their pelts. Now they were returning to Eskimo country near the Arctic Circle.

The third man, only twenty-five years old, had done much of his roving on the high seas. He was Frederick Astor, originally from Walldorf in the Black Forest region of Germany. Young Freddy had emigrated to New York at eighteen, following a spot of trouble with his overbearing employer in Germany. Freddy had been promised a job by his second cousin, John Jacob Astor, who himself had emigrated to the New World several years before and had sponsored many family members to join him there provided that they later reimbursed him for their fares, plus interest. Anxious to get away from Walldorf, where he had lost many jobs, Freddy seized on the opportunity. It was known that John Jacob had prospered in America, and Freddy, who considered himself more cultured and better educated than his cousin, felt sure he would do even better. So the tall, flaxen-haired youth with the pale silvery eyes had departed for New York with the highest expectations, sure he'd receive a warm welcome from John Jacob and his Scottish wife, Sarah, and be offered a position of importance in his firm.

He was in for a rude shock. Upon landing in New York, a town that was little better than a stinking swamp with a huddle of shantylike buildings and farms straggling out beyond, the latter mostly owned

by the dour Dutch, the new arrival stepped off the boat and waited to be embraced by his wealthy cousin. He waited in vain. Not only did Astor himself not appear to meet him, he sent no one in his stead, and after hanging about the docks for half a day, the puzzled youth spent the little money he had left making enquiries and hiring a conveyance to take him to his cousin's fine home, sure that there had been a

dreadful mistake.

He was refused entrance to Astor's home! Detained at the door like a beggar, Freddy was given his orders by a snooty butler. He was to proceed posthaste to the Gunnysack, a sort of rambling boardinghouse-cum-barracks, where Astor rented out accommodations to his workers, and there he was to await further instructions.

"Butbut I am Herr Astor's cousin!" Freddy explained. "You don't understand"

"No, excuse me, but it is *you* who does not understand," the servant interrupted coldly. "I have given you Mr. Astor's instructions, as he requested. He knows quite well who you are, young man. Now kindly follow his orders."

Once he was ensconced at the Gunnysack, the last of Freddy's illusions fell away. Most of the men living there were the sort that Freddy despised, rough, crude, ill-mannered in the extreme and they loathed him on sight. Young Astor, raised by a harsh father, had never cared for the company of men. His refined, genteel mother had taught him to appreciate the finer things in life, to be a gentleman; and through that, and the fact that his delicate coloring and slim build made other men assume that he was effeminate and weak, Freddy had always had trouble getting along with members of his own sex. He'd had to learn to stand up for himself the hard way; in North

America his very survival depended on it, so he was not afraid of the men in the Gunnysack. He could take care of himself.

It irked Astor that he was made to pay room and board like everyone else in the barracks. Since he had left Germany with next to nothing; his expenses were put on the tab and deducted off his wages, his first step towards perpetual debt to the company. He could think of only one reason to explain Astor's rejection. Somehow or other John Jacob had heard about Freddy's spotty employment record in Germany. Perhaps, he brooded, he had even heard about the time Freddy had landed in jail after striking a harlot who tried to rob him in a bar, complaining that the youth had used her services and refused to pay for them. Worst of all had been his mother's shock, the shame he had caused her, her disgust to learn that the boy she had raised to be a gentleman could have associated with such women in the first place. That had always perplexed Freddy too, how he was strangely drawn to strumpets, even while hating them; it was something he *still* hadn't

figured out.

He had been four months in America before he finally met John Jacob himself and what a shock that had been! Freddy had been expecting to find a fine, dignified gentleman. Instead, his cousin was blunt and coarse and totally lacking in culture, nor was he the type of man one could influence in any way. Astor soon made it clear that, relative or no relative, privileges had to be earned the hard way. He'd had it very hard himself when he first came to America and saw no reason to make it easier on others. Shrewd, ruthless, and to his death pennypinching, John Jacob was no more impressed by his cousin than Freddy was by him.

He gave the young man a difficult first assignment. Freddy was sent into the backcountry north of New

York to trade for furs with the Iroquois, an assignment that very nearly cost him his scalp. He got along no better with Indian men than with men of his own kind. Following that failure, he was ordered into an area west of Lake Superior, where he encountered even worse problems: the rigors of whiteout, snow blindness, starvation when game became scarce, disorientation, and all the trauma attendant on extreme loneliness and isolation. On one harrowing occasion he became separated from his party for two grueling months, and found himself talking to the animals, even quarreling with them, screaming at them at the top of his lungs, convinced they were making tracks in the snow to lead him astray.

When Freddy recovered from the nervous breakdown, John Jacob launched him on the high seas, assuring his cousin that the salt air would be good for his health. By then the older man had entered the lucrative China trade, so for the next three years Freddy plied the Pacific between the New World and Canton, enduring tropical storms, scurvy and dysentery, and almost worse, the constant close contact of his fellow men, swaggering, drunken louts who played nasty tricks on him constantly. These men, Astor knew, had him tagged as a loser. Not that Freddy cared what they thought about him in the least. What *did* bother him was that he had never risen in John Jacob's company. He seethed with disgruntlement and resentment, certain that his cousin took pleasure in keeping him down.

Then one day Astor sent for him.

"I'm taking you out of the China trade and entrusting you with a very

important mission," he said. "If you succeed you will be rewarded, but if you fail me you will be fired," he told the younger man bluntly. Then, never one to mince words, he confessed, "You have been a great disappointment to me, cousin. First,

your attitude is atrocious, your manner stiff and superior with others. I'm told that even the Indians shun your company. Secondly, you cannot seem to keep your mind on the job; you are far too easily distracted from your duties and seem to feel that the world owes you a living. I'm telling you now"he leaned forward and continued harshly"nobody else in this business would hire you. Your reputation has made the rounds. But . . . I am willing to give you this last chance to prove yourself. See you don't let me down."

Then the nature of the mission was revealed to Freddy.

"I want you to find a viable route through the Rockies and establish a port for me on the Pacific," John Jacob said, watching him closely. "Somewhere close to the mouth of the Columbia River."

Freddy's eyes bulged. He almost choked. The Pacific! The Columbia River! Why, only madmen and explorers with a death wish ever ventured into the territory known as Oregon Country, an obscure region of thick, impenetrable forests, uncharted rivers and lakes, boiling rapids, wild animals, and vicious tribes. Few who had gone there had ever returned alive, though those who had returned carried tales of the most wonderful natural resources and fur-bearing animals aplenty. Following the daring exploits of men like the Scotsman Alexander MacKenzie and the Americans Lewis and Clark, all the major fur companies were desperate to establish a port on the Pacific.

John Jacob Astor was determined to be there first.

Yes, even if his cousin had to die trying to establish it for him, Freddy thought bitterly, even while knowing that he daren't refuse.

That had been six weeks ago.

Now Freddy was in Lachine to pick his crew. French-Canadian voyageurs had the well-deserved

reputation of being the best in the business, and he knew he would need nothing short of the best where he was going. Astor had advanced him a goodly sum to pay for guides, interpreters, canoeists,

and supplies, with the promise that more money would be sent to him before he left Lachine. When he had reached the town earlier that day, Freddy had stopped at a tavern to wash the dust of the journey from his mouth, and there had met the two trappers on their way back to Eskimo Country. For an hour or so the three had drunk together and exchanged the latest gossip of the fur trade.

The trappers insisted that Freddy share their camp for the night.

Freddy was far from stupid. After seven years in the business he had met all sorts of rogues, and while these two definitely looked suspect the big one had a hideously scarred face Freddy wasn't worried unduly.

He was well able to stand up for himself, he thought confidently. By now his skinny frame had fleshed out and hardened into whipcord muscles that, while wiry, had served him well enough in the past. Besides, it amused him to underplay his physical prowess and experience in the world, and hide behind a certain wide-eyed naiveté just to see how far others would go. Most, he'd found, immediately tried to take advantage. Of course by then he was ready.

After a campside meal of duck and ptarmigan, Seth Bratchy took out a bottle of rum, drank some himself, and passed the bottle to Freddy, saying, "And you say you are soon to be off to the Oregon Country?"

Freddy nodded. "The plan is to try to establish a port on the Pacific, somewhere near the mouth of the Columbia River. Sea otter pelts are much desired in China, and my cousin"

"Do you mean John Jacob Astor?" the fellow called

LeMoy chimed in. When Freddy confessed that they were indeed related (he frequently boasted of his connection to the man he hated), LeMoy slapped his brow, laughing. "I should have tumbled to it when you introduced yourself earlier. It's not a common name." He sent a quick sidelong glance to Bratchy, then inquired, "Your cousin is well-known in the China trade; done a treat too, they say. It's rumored that he's worth his weight in gold, and that he drinks champagne for breakfast."

Freddy just smiled. He hadn't the foggiest idea what his cousin drank for breakfast, having never set foot in his home.

Bratchy chuckled. "Let us hope he spilled a little coin your way."

"Very little," Freddy replied honestly. "He's not over-generous." The understatement of the decade!

Again the two trappers exchanged a sly look. LeMoy was a half-breed, the product of a French father and Indian mother; he was a rosy little man with a swarthy skin and his two front teeth missing, making him whistle when he talked. "Tell us more about your cousin and this idea of his for pushing through to the Pacific. It's going to be dangerous and very costly, but then I suppose he can afford"

"Bugger it!" Bratchy interrupted, raising his head and cocking an ear downriver. "What in the name of Christ is that noise?"

They all listened a minute and heard the shouts and cheers and the wild, lilting music. Intrigued, all three rose and walked down to investigate . . . and saw Keira dancing in-the glow of the fire.

Freddy Astor's obsession began then.

When everybody joined in the dancing, Freddy and LeMoy threw themselves into the spirit of the party. Bratchy slunk away into the darkness.

Freddy kept following the girl as she whirled about in the arms of various partners, impatiently waiting for his chance to cut in, his eyes never leaving the lovely flushed face as he bumped and stumbled into people, his clumsiness earning him a shove or two. Keira seemed to him like a brilliant butterfly fluttering excitedly around a flame. Take care you don't get burned, Freddy found himself thinking. As he watched her, an image of his father's sour face rose in Astor's mind. "Harlot!" the old man would have accused had he been here to watch this. "The harlot needs the rod across her back."

His parents had been strict Calvinists, and the rod had never been spared in the family home. On looking back, Freddy felt that he had known the sting of it far oftener than his brothers and sisters. His father had never liked him. The favorite had been his older brother, Rolf, a lad much like their father, a boy who had followed him everywhere. A pox on them, thought Freddy.

Eventually Freddy managed to cut in, and he trembled when he found Keira in his arms, such a fragile, fairy creature! His eyes were riveted to her face.

"Well, what is *your* name, sir?" she inquired pertly, amused at the way

he was staring at her, his pale eyes like mirrors; Keira had never seen such light eyes before. They disconcerted her.

He had a very soft voice, and mumbled something that she couldn't hear over the music and noise going on about them, so Keira had to ask him to repeat it.

"It's Fred Astor," he obliged. "May I have the honor of knowing yours?"

Ah, she thought, a gentleman! "Keira MacKenzie," she replied with a smile, little realizing how that smile affected him. "You're not French, are you?" she went on. "Your accent sounds a little different."

"I'm from Germany." Then some madness made

him blurt, "Will you marry me?" He was only half-jesting. But before Keira could answer him, Astor felt a heavy hand on his shoulder, a hand that jerked him away from the girl. "This one is mine," a deep voice announced possessively, and the object of his sudden passion was whisked away in the arms of Luc Duval.

Keira had been basking in the outrageous flattery of Fred Astor and her other partners; it had been like old times in the Highlands, the merry company, the music and dancing and harmless flirtations. She had been popular then, and bonny, as she'd been told often enough, and though Keira knew well enough that she wasn't the same gay, blooming lass she had been then, still . . . it was reassuring to know that at least *some* men still found her attractive.

When Luc Duval finally condescended to dance with her, Keira felt a curious mixture of annoyance and excitement, which she covered with a frown. "I was just enjoying an interesting conversation with that nice Astor fellow when you interrupted," she pouted. Something made her boast, "He asked me to marry him."

"Astor is a fool," Duval growled.

"How uncivil and rude you are!" She was stung.

"Well," he laughed, "congratulations. When are the nuptials taking place?"

Keira was tempted to slap the complacent smirk off his face. "If I *did* get married, what would happen about the bond? Surely you couldn't force me to wait two whole years?"

"Ah, such unseemly impatience!" He gave her a strange, penetrating look as if reassessing her, and indeed the girl had surprised him in many ways tonight. "A maiden is supposed to be bashful and delicately modest when contemplating all that marriage entails or at least most of them pretend to be. But you such uninhibited zest!" His arm tightened

around her slightly as they moved around the circle of the fire, and Keira saw the flames of it reflected in his deep brown eyes, the orange glow turning his strong tanned face a deep copper. "But perhaps you know something of what it entails already," he added, a dark brow raised questioningly.

Keira blushed. Her fingers itched to grab him by his hair and twist until he cried for mercy. "That's naught for you to know!" she snapped. "Now" she glanced around "I would like to rest awhile."

Luc threw back his head and laughed, and instead of releasing her proceeded to whirl her around, then toss her high into the air over his head, and continued spinning and tossing her until it was Keira who finally cried for mercy, so dizzy and exhausted that she was forced to clutch at him to steady herself when Duval finally slowed his pace. "I would like to sit down," she said, her voice unusually meek.

"Not sit down, *lie* down. Come on . . ."

He propelled her through the crowd and away from the fire and into the darkness in the direction of her tent.

8

Away from the fire it was very dark. Pungent earth smells rose from the ground and a faint mist from the river. As they walked downhill, Luc's arm about her, Keira felt cool, moist grass brush against her legs and shivered. The area where the two tents had been pitched was deep in shadow, the low gurgle of water close by.

They stopped outside her tent and faced each other, Luc's arms still loosely about her waist. "Well, time for bed," he said, smiling. "I think you've broken enough hearts for one night."

Keira could tell he was humoring her, as he might have done with a child, and she had a sudden, reckless urge to provoke him and retorted without stopping to think, "Were you jealous?" She was

appalled the instant the words were out.

"*Very* jealous." His tone was heavily mocking. "Was that what you wanted?"

"No," Keira said, tossing her head, "don't be ridiculous."

She was so maddeningly provocative and beautiful. And it *had* been what she wanted. Luc, with his experience, saw that more clearly than Keira. He acted then without pausing to consider the consequences. "Perhaps you want this too," he said, and drew her close and kissed her. His lips were warm, the pressure light, almost casual, but for Keira the touch of them was electrifying. She had the dizzying sensation of falling through space, and her arms flew up to his neck as she swayed against him. It was then she became acutely conscious of his crisp black hair brushing her fingers, the warmth of his skin, but most of all the hard, unfamiliar contours of his male body against hers.

Suddenly the music and the laughter of the ceilidh seemed far away; far away too was her usually keen sense of self-preservation. Keira had been buoyed up all night, filled with a restless expectancy. Now, as a wildness surged through her, she knew that it had all been leading up to this moment in Luc Duval's arms.

Luc was surprised when he felt her yielding to him and again wondered what had wrought this amazing change in her. But . . . her mouth was sweet as honeyed wine under his lips and her hair silkily fragrant, and there was nothing childlike or innocent about the way she pressed herself against him. He recalled Keira telling him that Scottish girls were often married as young as fifteen, recalled too that she had refused to answer his question about the extent of her own experience. He could have been totally wrong about the girl all along, he mused, and if that was the case and she was willing . . .

Yet he hesitated as another woman's face rose hazily in his mind, that of his fiancée, Clarise Menard. Luc felt a stab of guilt, and for a moment temptation

waged a fierce battle with his conscience as he was reminded of the hasty promise he had made to Clarise long ago in his youth. He had pledged himself to her out of a sense of gratitude and honor, and, impulsive and unwise as that promise might have been considering his age and inexperience then, still . . . he had made it.

Reluctantly he pushed Keira away, and there was a moment of awkwardness between them when they could hear the river slapping against its banks, the creaking of a tree swaying in the wind, and, less noisy now, the sound of one-eyed Henri playing an old French love song. Keira's emotions were in chaos; she couldn't understand Luc Duval at all. To kiss her like that then thrust her away! She didn't know whether to feel insulted or relieved, and waited breathlessly to see what he was going to do now.

Keira had the impression that Luc was trying to make up his mind about something; in the darkness it was impossible to read his expression, but she could feel him staring at her intently as if he had never really looked at her closely before.

Finally he said, "You should go to bed now."

It was like a slap in the face. Her pride was stung, and Keira responded hotly, "You had no right to kiss me!" She knew that her cry of outrage had come a little late, which only made her angrier.

Luc didn't deny it or try to foist the blame on her.

"You are quite right," he murmured. "I apologize."

There was nothing to do now but go into her tent, yet Keira couldn't move, couldn't seem to break the taut band of tension linking them. She must be reasonable, she warned herself, and try to smooth things over. What would it gain her to constantly fight with Duval like this, to antagonize the man who held her bond? In essence, Luc Duval owned her for the next two years, and like it or not he was about to carry

her into the wilderness where she would be completely at his mercy. Under the circumstances he had the power to make life miserable for her if he chose, and as long as certain limits were established between them, well, it would be more to her advantage to try to get on with Duval rather than quarrel with him.

Keira relaxed slightly, admitting, "I am weary of this constant bickering."

"I too," Luc confessed, wondering what she was up to now.

Encouraged, Keira went on, feeling her way in unfamiliar territory; her experience of dealing with men was almost nil. "Would it not be better if we tried to be civil with each other . . . if we made an effort to get on together?"

"I agree." Keira thought she saw him smile.

Heartened, she too smiled, adding more lightly, "I suppose it's even possible that we might grow to like each other"

"Like?" Her choice of word startled Luc and he chuckled. He reached

casually for her hands, amused at Keira's earnestness and naiveté, asking himself what exactly she was trying to tell him. "Let me understand you," he said. "You feel the time has come for us to get to know one another properly, considering that we'll be spending so much time together, and in such a lonely place? You would genuinely like that, Keira?"

"I would. And you, sir?"

"I feel the same. Exactly!"

"Perhaps . . . perhaps we could talk a little now," Keira suggested shyly.

Luc felt a great surge of blood through his veins, the sudden tautness in his loins, the powerful grip of desire take possession of him. His resolve crumbled and Clarise Menard's face faded from his mind and all he could think of was the woman he was with now

and how strongly she appealed to him.

Luc stepped around Keira and threw open the flap of her tent.

She went in ahead of him; the interior was pitch black. Immediately she listened nervously, recalling Maurice's lurid tales about the huge river rats that sometimes crept up from the water in search of food left lying around.

"Light the lantern," she whispered. "There might be rats . . ."

Luc hadn't intended on lighting the lamp and her request surprised him, but he shrugged and did as she asked and it was a mistake. When it flared up he saw her face in the bright orange glow, her gray eyes wide with a mixture of uncertainty and excitement, her cheeks flushed, a nervous little smile hovering about her mouth when their eyes met. Keira didn't know what she was about! He saw that quite clearly. The girl really *was* innocent; he could no longer deceive himself.

Luc suddenly thrust the lantern into her hand and told her harshly, "For God's sake, get to bed!" his expression tight and almost grim.

Keira started, stunned at the change in him. Luc Duval hadn't meant a word he'd said! Yes, she thought, her heart sinking, he had only been mocking her and had no intention of trying to be friends. In fact, now

that she thought of it, she had no friends at all in this country. When Luc walked out, Keira had an impulse to dash outside and throw herself into the river.

He had taken only a few steps away from the tent when Luc heard her weeping bitterly, and it struck him as the saddest, most heart-rending sound in the world. She had no family, no one of her own, and she had reached out to him in her guileless way only to have him spurn her. He had hurt her, thought Luc,

and she had no idea why.

He stopped, wavering, then strode back to the tent and threw open the flap to find Keira slumped on her bedroll sobbing as if her heart would break. With a muffled groan Luc picked her up and crushed her against him, and when Keira raised her face to him, such hope in her eyes, he ravished that beautiful face with kisses, tender and passionate at once. After a moment's surprise Keira's arms came up and slipped around his neck. "Oh, I'm so glad you came back!" she cried, and snuggled happily against him, little realizing the effect it had on Luc's crumbling control. His body was ramrod hard, but with the last of his strength he held her away from him and asked her hoarsely, "Do you know what's happening?"

"Aye . . ." she whispered, but did she? No man had ever held her like this, kissed her with such hunger, or had the power to melt her with one glance from those glowing dark eyes. All Keira knew was that he had come back and she was happy. It was enough for now.

When Luc doused the lamp she was a little surprised, then he lowered her onto the mattress and lay down beside her and again took her in his arms, drawing her close so that she felt the whole length of his body pressed against her. She blushed a deep pink when she felt how hard and muscular he was, but fortunately it was too dark for him to notice. She was determined not to say or do anything that might spoil things between them now; after all, *she* had been the one to suggest they be nice to each other, and Luc was certainly being very nice to her now. Keira's dreadful loneliness of a moment before had vanished. The sad ache in her heart melted a little when he whispered in her ear, "There's no need to cry. I promise to take very good care of you; to be good to you." Then Luc kissed her deeply as if to seal that promise, and such a kiss it was! His lips hungrily took masterful possession

of hers, and Keira felt his tongue slide sensuously into her mouth and at the same time his warm hands roved up under her blouse to caress the silken skin of her back. His intimate touch gave Keira a delicious little jolting shock that brought a low moan of pleasure from her lips, and she trembled as she felt his fingers lightly tracing her body from waist to shoulders, then slowly meander under her arm to the fullness of her breast. Instinctively Keira pressed even closer to the hard male body beside her, a rush of excitement and anticipation welling up inside her, all her senses tinglingly alive in a way they never had been before. Then she felt the wicked craving blaze up deep within her, and though she started to feel a touch of alarm, that powerful craving swiftly blocked it out so that the protest she uttered was feeble. "Luc, do youyou feel"

"I feel wonderful!" he breathed against her ear, and his hand was suddenly covering her breast, his thumb stroking her nipple, every movement sending a piercing thrill winging through her, and the nameless longing inside her increased.

But thisthis was wrong! Even through the wine befuddling her head Keira knew that quite well. This wasn't what she had meant at all when she had suggested they try to be nice to each otheryet never had she felt as warm and cherished, as stirred and excited in her life, nor as close to another human being, and that yearning to be close to someone proved to be her undoing.

Everything happened fast after that. Luc's kisses and caresses grew more passionate, more intimate, his lips at her throat, her breasts, his tongue driving her wild with that pounding craving as he teasingly rasped it back and forth across her nipples. She was drowning in an erotic world of new sensations, and nothing seemed quite real to Keira from then on. Of course

she had rashly consumed a great deal of wine at the ceilidh. She had danced until she was dizzy. Then this sweet tortureperhaps she was dreaming, she told herself. She must be, because it seemed to her that Luc had taken her clothes off, and she hadn't even felt it happen!

His burning hand moved between her legs.

That shocked her. Keira gasped, "'Tis sinful! You must stop!"

Yet . . . she did nothing to stop him. Instead, she lay transfixed, a mad pulse throbbing in her head as she felt herself opening like a dew-drenched flower under his fingers, and slowly, so maddeningly slowly,

those sensuous fingers almost drove her mad. Keira couldn't move, couldn't speak as pleasure such as she had never dreamed of pulsed through her in waves, each one more intense, more powerful than the last. Sweat broke out on her skin and she felt a burning heat fan out all over her body, a body that was writhing now, straining against him, reaching to clutch at his arm, his shoulders, his hips. "Don't stop!" she moaned, in contrast to a moment before. "Oh . . . please don't stop!"

But Luc did stop, though only long enough to get up and throw off his clothes, then he was back beside her, his knees between her thighs, his hands raising her legs to encircle his body.

He couldn't see them at all, but he could hear them as he crouched with his ear pressed to the back of the tent, and what he heard drove him to a frenzy of icy fury, causing his fingers to close convulsively around the hilt of the hatchet in his hand. "Bitch!" he thought. "Beautiful, whoring bitch!" Yet he wanted her more than ever now, shaking as he thought of all the things he would do to her.

He had followed them back to the tent, watched

them embracing and listened to her teasing the Frenchman about being jealous. Jealous! Did they know, he wondered, that jealousy was first cousin to hate, hate one short step away from murder?

They had no idea he was nearby, but then they wouldn't because he was Wolf, wily and rapacious. He was Hawk, keen-sighted and swift. And he was Phantom, able to move about like a ghost, sure-footed and silent as any Indian.

Then he heard the girl moan, "Don't stop! Please don't stop!"

Something exploded in his mind and he saw darkness, then a roaring burst of orange fire. With a keening howl of mingled pain and fury, he brought the hatchet slicing down through the canvas of the tent, then vanished into the night.

When screams rang out over the sound of the music, everybody froze, then pandemonium broke out at the campsite. People ran about in confusion, not sure at first where the cries had come from, but they were quickly traced to the two tents close to the river's edge.

With everybody pushing and shoving, the flap of Keira's tent was cautiously eased back and they gazed into an eerie darkness, not sure what to expect. In the hinterlands the screams could have been the signal of an Indian attack, but here in Lachine the only Indians about were what the people called "tame redskins," though now and then a renegade would appear who harbored a grudge against the white man.

Maurice came panting down the slope with a lantern, his hand shaking as he raised it high to illuminate the pitch-black interior of the tent. A chilling sight met their eyes. The inside of the little shelter was like a battleground with blood everywhere, and the

rear of the tent had been ripped to shreds. They found Luc Duval hanging over Keira as she lay sprawled on her back, her pale skin covered in blood.

"Jesus Christ!" a trader yelled, "somebody find a doctor!"

"Or barber," Maurice added. "Barber would do."

But a stout matron, her broad face still flushed from the dancing, elbowed the men aside, commanding, "Gan awa and let me by! Ye'll do a fine lot o' guid standing there gawking."

The good lady marched boldly inside and pulled Luc back from Keira and placed two pudgy fingers under the girl's jaw. After a moment she nodded, "She's no' deid, but she's swooned clean awa."

Next she turned her attention to Luc, who while examining Keira had held a hand clamped to his left forearm. When Mistress Findlay pulled it away, a thin stream of blood spurted up like a geyser, and kept spurting with each beat of his heart. "The lad's artery's been severed," she announced to the crowd at large. "Now you" she jabbed an ashen-faced Maurice with her finger "get oot yonder and find me a stick and piece of rope."

"I'm fine!" Luc protested, annoyed at the fuss. "For God's sake, attend to the girl!"

"Close yer mooth!" Mrs. Findlay scolded. "A ken whit am aboot, and the lassie will last a guid sight longer than you will, Luc Duval, wi' that airm draining awa yer life's blood. A few minutes longer and . . ." She shrugged.

Duval proved to be a far more difficult patient than Keira, but the good wife was up to it. She was one of the few trader's wives who had spent any time in the wilds, and while there she'd had to contend with far worse in the way of injuries, though Luc fought her every step of the way. His main concern was to immediately initiate a search to try to find the person

who had done this, and he shouted at Maurice to take a group of the voyageurs and comb the riverbank. He would have gone with them, but Mrs. Findlaya hefty lady with a will equal to his own informed him in no uncertain terms that he would do no such thing, and by then he was beginning to feel a little weak and dizzy through loss of blood. But even then he refused to allow his nurse to apply a tourniquet to his arm until she had examined Keira more thoroughly and ascertained that she was in no immediate danger.

It turned out that most of the blood on Keira had come from him, though she had a deep nick on her shoulder that required stitching. By leaning over her, Luc had saved her from the worst of the attack, and Keira was more concerned about Duval than herself. From the jagged rip in the mattress near where their heads had been, they were able to figure out that the weapon had missed them by inches. "Who would want to do that?" Keira whispered.

The culprit was not found, though Maurice and the voyageurs and others scoured all the camps on the river and even ranged into the nearby town. Lachine was a busy place and full of transients, people on their way to Montreal to sell furs, or heading back west to procure more, and it was easy for a criminal to lose himself in such a place. There was no question of redress, but that was usually the case for crimes committed on the frontier.

François offered a possible explanation. "Do you think it could have been some drunkard jealous because you . . ." he blushed, ". . . were in the girl's tent?" he asked Luc in French. In fact, he had been quite jealous himself. "Some were drinking a lot, remember? Maybe it was a spur-of-the-moment thing, a fit of madness. Whoever did it could be sorry now."

There was no possibility of interviewing every man

who had danced with Keira, Luc thought grimly. It seemed to him that just about every male along the river had danced with the girl that night; by morning many of them had left Lachine to go about their

business, or, possibly, to escape justice.

He had his own thoughts on the matter, but in the end had to shrug it off and turn his own attention back to business. In two more days they were scheduled to leave Lachine. Every day counted in the West; they had to take full advantage of the brief summer season before the relentless hand of winter again set in.

For the next forty-eight hours Keira hardly saw Duval, except when he stopped briefly to inquire how she was. At such times she could scarcely bring herself to meet his eyes; when they *did* meet, every smoldering detail of their time together in the tent rose vividly in her mind; in his too, Keira was certain. Sober now, she found she could not heap all the blame on Luc. If she were honest with herself, she brooded, she was as much at fault as he was. Dear God, what had gotten into her that night! She had known, yes *known*, that there had been something wanton in her dancing, something that had never been there before, and he, Duval, had brought it out in her.

Keira's cheeks burned when she considered her behavior in the tent. Wanton! No other word to describe it. And being a man, a very masculine man, Duval had naturally taken full advantage. The things he had done to her! Or more to the point, the things she had *let* him do, even going so far as to beg for more!

Now, of course, she was bitterly ashamed of herself, but the attack had accomplished something good saved her virginity.

Keira, wondering how much the crew guessed, felt like hiding away in her tent, which had been carefully repaired. But there was no point in hiding; she

couldn't stay in her tent forever, so she forced herself out, even made herself go on as usual as if nothing had happened, and the crew did the same.

But the incident left her very nervous, in more ways than one, and Keira found it difficult to sleep at night. Duval had instructed François or one of the other voyageurs to sleep directly outside her tent, and her guard was always armed, but still she was apprehensive, asking herself over and over who could have wanted to harm them. Or, she mused, could robbery have been the real motive? Could somebody have sliced through the tent thinking it was unoccupied, only to get the fright of his life when she screamed?

Keira supposed they would never know the true story, but she shuddered to think what would have happened if Duval had been killed. She pondered on that constantly during the times when she was alone, and it always got back to one thing. If Luc died she would have no one at all to care about her.

It was a sobering thought.

Supposing he were to hand her her bond and announce that she was free to go. Where *would* she go, Keira mused; what would she do?

Her concept of freedom itself had undergone a radical change. For one thing, she had no money or people of her own in North America to help her, and she was unversed in the ways of this wild land. And no matter how her pride rankled at the thought, in Duval she had a protector and in his crew of voyageurs a new family to surround her. There was comfort in that. So . . . Keira's mind ran on . . . provided that Duval left her with her dignity intact and made no unreasonable demands on her, her two years with him might pass well enough but that hot night in his arms could never be repeated! She would be no man's harlot, no, not for anything in the world.

In Lachine Luc was joined by the rest of his team as final preparations were made for the journey west. Twenty-four more voyageurs arrived, married men who had spent the interval with their families. There was an aging doctor called Cabot, a man with a florid face and seamy moist eyes. "He drinks like fish," François whispered to Keira. "But he good docteur when he sober. He familiar with disease in le pays d'en haut."

"Le pays d'en haut?" Keira echoed, frowning.

"At upcountry."

"Oh." The two youngest members of the team smiled at each other, then laughed, and François said impulsively, "Your eyes like star."

His own blue eyes were shining at that moment as they rested on Keira's face, and he had a sudden urge to seize her and press a kiss to her soft, full lips, to shower her face with kisses. Encouraged by her warm smile, the shy François's gaze traveled over her warmly and Keira suddenly knew his attraction for her. He was tallish and sturdily built, with a mop of thick brown hair, but his face was very young, the type who would always look boyish. And he was bothered with the scourge of youth: spots.

Keira decided to make light of the moment, considering that they would be traveling together. She was anxious to avoid awkwardness.

"What a flirt you are!" she teased. "How old are you, François?"

He had an urge to lie, to say he was somewhere near Duval's age, but he knew he would quickly be found out. So he mumbled, "Nineteen," adding quickly, "but I be voyageur since I thirteen year old."

"Thirteen!" Keira was amazed.

"Oui," he nodded, pleased that she seemed impressed. "My father and grandpère voyageur also, and I want to go too very quick. I got as much experience

in upcountry as Duval," he boasted, "but now . . . now I not like it. I not want to waste time in wilderness. I save to buy tavern in Montreal."

"Really?" Keira sensed that he saw Luc as a rival. She started to move away.

François nodded. "I like city best now. I going to be businessman soon."

Later that afternoon Jasper Rawson made his appearance, or rather, his entrance. For a man who was only of average height, mediocre looks; completely ordinary in appearance, Rawson's arrival nevertheless made quite a stir. The voyageurs greeted Duval's accountant and manager with scowls and considerable mumbling among themselves. Cabot, the doctor, gave him a sour look and spat into the river. But Luc seemed pleased to see him and waved him into his own tent where the two men could talk privately. The voyageurs were nosy and so was Keira.

The following day while Duval went off to a meeting with the partners of the North West Company then in Lachine, Keira was able to observe at first hand why Jasper Rawson was so unpopular. First, he was English, and the French-Canadian voyageurs hated the English, and with good reason, as they saw it. Secondly, the little Englishman was brusque and officious and very conscious of his position in Duval's company, which Keira discovered later that day was called simply Western Furs. He took over his duties with a vengeance, mincing briskly among the surly voyageurs with a clipboard tucked under his arm, carefully noting each and every item tucked away in the canoes

and jotting it down on his ledger. Some of the items, like extra rations of rum, he ordered tossed over the side into the river. This brought outraged cries and arm-waving from the men even Dr. Cabot howled his objections. "Over the side!" snapped Rawson. "At

once! You know the rules here." And for their edification he spelled them out in the clipped English voice that so incensed them. "Each of you are allowed one pair of boots, one heavy rug, two shirts and two pairs of breeches, four pounds of tobacco. And as for spirits"

The cursing and swearing drowned him out. Several even made rude gestures. "I'll take note of that," said Rawson, and scribbled the offending names down in his book along with everything else.

Keira was highly amused and chuckled to herself as she watched them. The prissy little accountant, she noticed, was exceedingly neat. There wasn't one splotch of mud or speck of dust marring his neatly pressed suit, and his hair too looked as if it had been pressed with a heavy iron, smoothed back in a slick cap about his skull. Further, although he was quite short and slightly made and most of the voyageurs exceptionally brawny, Rawson wasn't in the least cowed by them. On the contrary. He commanded one burly fellow to take everything back out of a canoe that he had spent hours packing. "You'll do it right," said Jasper, "or you shan't do it at all. And that means the sack."

Keira covered her mouth with her hand to hold back her laughter, but it wasn't long before she felt the impact of Mr. Jasper Rawson herself. When his alert hazel eyes spotted her standing outside her tent, he immediately bounced over. "Goodness gracious me!" His eyes scoured her up and down. "And who are you, pray?"

"Keira MacKenzie, sir." She felt a little nervous.

"Indeed." He pulled his eyes from hers and flicked through the pages of his ledger until he found the company roster, but there was no Keira MacKenzie among the list of names. Rawson, Keira saw, was clearly very puzzled. She, for her part, was embar-

rassed, unwilling to explain how she'd come to be with them. Behind them, she heard a few of the men tittering and hot color burst into her face, especially as one of them shouted something to Rawson in French, something that made the accountant's expression clear, leading Keira to understand that he'd been given an explanation of

sorts. What it was she trembled to think.

"Well, well," he said, rocking back and forth on his heels, a certain disdain in his eyes now, a look that made Keira cringe. "So that's the way of it, is it. Hummm . . ." Then, after a moment of rubbing his chin while he pondered something, Rawson said, "Can you cook, miss?"

"Not very well . . ." Her grandmother had done all the cooking at home. *Her* chores had been heavier, mostly outdoor work connected to the garden and animals. Later, just before she was wed, she'd have learned domestic skills.

"Sew?"

Keira shook her head. Her mother had done all the sewing.

Jasper sniffed disapproval and muttered under his breath, "But there's *something* she's obviously good at." Then in a more normal tone he went on, "Well, we shall have to find tasks for you to do. Idleness can't be tolerated in this camp." He glanced about for a moment, then pointed to a huge heap of tangled towlines. "Start by unraveling those. That should keep you occupied for an hour or two, at least."

In less than an hour the tips of Keira's fingers were raw and bleeding and her arms aching from handling the rough hemp rope, struggling in frustration to get out the knots and kinks in the heavy fiber. She was more than ready to work; she had worked hard all her life, but how she wished that she had told Rawson she could cook! Or even sew. Before much more time had

elapsed, Keira was making faces at Rawson behind his back along with everybody else, little dreaming that in the end he was destined to become one of her dearest friends.

"What right do the Hudson's Bay Company have to Athabasco Country?" Malcolm McTavish demanded of his luncheon guests as they sat around the long dining table in Aspen Lodge. "That territory belongs to the North West Company by right of possession, and we are quite justified in taking whatever steps we think is necessary to shut them out much as they did with us at Hudson Bay. Where were the Bay people when we opened up that region west of Superior, eh? I'll tell you where they were, sitting on their fat, complacent arses on the shores of Hudson Bay, too afraid to venture out of their safe forts!"

"Their arses aren't so fat now," another man said, laughing. "Nor, for

that matter, are they quite so complacent. I ask you, when did they last pay a dividend?" When everybody shrugged, he continued, "As we all know, dwindling profits and the prospect of going out of business altogether has finally made their noble masters in London sit up and take notice. So . . . I suppose they must reason that if they can't beat us, then they must join us. Aye, and even try to best us at our own game."

"It's taken them long enough to wake up, more than a hundred years!" a junior partner sneered. "One certainly couldn't accuse them of being quick learners. In essence, they've sat at a feast for close on a century and watched the food grow cold on their plates. I for one think they've left it too late and they'll never catch up now. We have the tribes north and west of Superior in our back pockets, so who will bring furs to their forts?"

Luc Duval glanced at the injured faces around him,

most of them the Scottish partners and chief factors of the North West Fur Company then in Lachine, together with a few guests like himself, independents generally sympathetic to the company, the prime rivals of the Hudson Bay firm. But he wasn't so sure that they had the Indians in their back pockets. His own experience with the various tribes was that they were a fickle lot and quite prepared to trade with whoever brought them the greatest rewards, which he supposed was natural enough. And though the partners in the North West Company claimed it was illegal and obsolete, the Bay group had a powerful royal charter to back up their right to the territory under dispute, an enormous land mass encompassing at least a quarter of North America.

He liked and admired the Scottish merchants. They were his type of mending, enterprising, hardworking, and ambitious men who charted their own destiny, where the Bay Company men were no more than servants to their absentee masters in London, none of whom had ever set foot in the fur country, yet had the audacity to make policy and direct operations just the same.

Luc knew the history of both firms well, mainly because the French had been the *real* guiding hand behind the oldest of them though the Bay people chose to forget that. As a boy, Luc had thrilled to the story of Pierre Radisson and Medard Groseilliers, explorers and adventurers who had ranged for years over the North American continent, encountering the most incredible dangers and hardships almost every

step of the way. Radisson in particular had had a way with the Indians and started doing business with them, using the money he made to finance future exploration. That was in 1658.

It was their fourth trip into the West that landed the two men in trouble. They embarked on that journey

without taking the time to ask permission of the French governor of the day and were severely (and unfairly, they maintained) fined upon their return to civilization. At that the two explorers defected from France and tossed in their lot with the British, a country known to favor the expansion of trade abroad.

King Charles II and his cousin, Prince Rupert, were most interested to hear what the Frenchmen had to say. After listening to them, they formed a select group made up of nobility and wealthy London merchants, to finance a trading mission to the far-flung region, with the stipulation that they should share in any profits that were made. With the two Frenchmen leading the way, the subsequent mission proved very successful, whereupon King Charles granted the principals an incredible royal charter or monopoly to trade in Hudson Bay, or Rupert's Land as it was sometimes called in honor of Prince Rupert.

The terms of the charter were astonishing in scope and the territory it covered enormous. The potential was stupendous when overall natural resources and sheer land size were considered. Great power was put into the hands of the newly formed group, officially known as The Company of Adventurers of England Trading into Hudson Bay, power unheard of before and since. Yet for more than a century the company never exercised a fraction of that power. Instead, they were content to sit tight in their forts around the Bay and let the Indians bring the furs to them, showing no interest whatsoever in further exploration to see what else of worth they might uncover.

The French, naturally, angrily disputed their right to such a vast area. Even some in the British Parliament thought it was wrong. So for years following the formation of the company the French and English fought bitterly along the icy shores of Hudson Bay

while various treaties between them were made and broken. But finally, with the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, the Hudson Bay region was firmly in the hands of the British, and they had kept a stranglehold on it ever since.

For more than a hundred years they sat unchallenged on Hudson Bay, then along came a group of hungry Scotsmen who threw down the gauntlet. These Montreal merchants had been driven from Scotland following the Jacobite Rebellion and were accustomed to having to struggle against heavy odds, in this case the greatest monopoly on earth. Under the directorship of Simon McTavish, the North West Fur Company was formed in 1783, a company with headquarters in Montreal rather than in faraway London. They began without the benefit of a generous royal charter, nor were there any noble lords among the partners, but the partners had one great advantage over the London-based group: they were on the spot, or at least much closer to it.

With a speed that stunned their rivals, the vigorous men of the North West Company wrested the bulk of the fur trade away from the Bay Company. To do so they had to range far into the interior, something the Bay people refused to do. The new firm discovered vast new fur-rich regions west of Lake Superior, areas like the Assiniboine Valley and even more distant Athabasca. They met tribes more than willing to do business with them, and they walked on land where white men had never walked before. Soon they had seventy percent of the fur business.

They seemed invincible.

Luc Duval, thinking things over, wasn't so sure. The Nor'Westers had one serious drawback. That was the great distance they had to take their furs to market, while their rivals could ship them off to London in half the time from their better position on

Hudson Bay. The distance and huge expense involved in having to take the longer route severely cut into profits and, Luc felt, would long-since have undermined a less vigorous and carefully managed company than the North West. They were fortunate too, he mused, that their competitor continued to languish in their coma for so long, a lassitude that struck Luc as nothing short of incredible.

But . . . the slumbering giant had finally woken and belatedly cast corporate eyes into the interior where their rivals were busily flourishing, and with that everything changed.

The trade war was on!

As Luc listened to the partners angrily protesting the latest outrage—the sacking and burning of forts, the ambushing of trading

brigades, the inciting of the Indians to not only leave the North West Company but to massacre its representatives. Luc twirled the stem of his wine glass and again counted himself fortunate that he was an independent and not aligned with either side, regardless of how he felt in a personal sense. His goal was to succeed in business, and he failed to see how a trade war would benefit any of them.

Luc decided to voice something that had long been in his mind.

"The North West Company and Hudson's Bay should amalgamate. Each has something the other lacks. You Nor'Westers lack a good shipping port to London, the Bay lacks your knowledge of the interior and the forts and factories you've already established there." He grinned, raising his hands a little. "The perfect union."

They were shocked.

"You can't be serious," McTavish said.

Luc inclined his head. "Perfectly serious. And the time to join forces is now, while you are still in a

strong bargaining position. Don't forget, by branching inland and establishing trading forts in your own area the Bay people now have a great advantage over you, considering that they can ship their pelts to market in half the time, and at half the expense."

"Pah, they'll never catch up with us!" a young factor scoffed. "And we won't be standing still waiting for them to do so either. We ourselves will continue to forge ahead. No, no, we have nothing to fear with that crew."

Duval shrugged. He had said his piece and wouldn't waste his breath in arguing, but he felt they were making a great mistake, one of the few they had ever made.

As Luc was leaving Aspen Lodge he was intercepted by Malcolm McTavish. Malcolm was a senior partner, cousin to Simon McTavish, the founder of the company, now deceased. For the past several years Malcolm had tried to persuade Luc to join the company and had made him many tempting offers, always politely turned down.

Malcolm also happened to be one of the first people Keira had approached at the picnic when they first arrived in Lachine.

For a few minutes both men discussed the grave repercussions of the trade war now seething in the West, then McTavish said, "And how is your fair Clarise? When will she be coming to join you? I confess, we are all most anxious to meet her and have her grace our society in Mount Royal."

Luc's dark eyes became remote. He guessed what the older man was leading up to, but he replied blandly enough, "Hopefully next summer, if all goes as I planned."

"Splendid, splendid!" McTavish slapped him on the back. "And I hear you lately purchased land close to us in Montreal. My good lady was delighted about

that. You know how all the wives like to stick together. Safety in numbers, or some such." He chuckled, his eyes searching Luc's face.

Suddenly McTavish stepped closer and nudged Duval in the ribs. "And the bonny wee Highland lass?" he queried under his breath. "How does *she* fit into the scheme of things?" He went on with an edge to his voice, "I've never heard of one of *our* women being content to be a country wife."

Luc made no effort to hide his annoyance. He liked most of the Scots in the North West Company, but Malcolm McTavish wasn't one of them. Considering his lowly beginnings as a serf in the Highlands of Scotland, McTavish had a highly inflated opinion of himself, Luc had always thought. His sly reference to a "country" wife almost made Duval smile. McTavish himself, during his days trading in the Northwest, had had two such "wives" that Luc knew of and fathered at least six mixed-blood children. Of course it was different, McTavish thought cynically, when one of his own countrywomen might be cast in that role.

Luc eyed McTavish coldly. "I haven't yet decided where the girl will fit into the company," he told him, putting emphasis on the word "company," knowing full well that McTavish would never believe that he'd take a *woman* into his firm but he could make of it what he would, Luc thought irritably.

On the way back to camp he witnessed a fight outside one of the many taverns in Lachine. A big crowd had gathered to watch and cheer the fighters on, and among them, standing in the shadows at the side of the building, Luc thought he saw Seth Bratchy. Fury boiled up inside him when he thought of that night in the tent and how close

Keira had come to being killed. Luc plunged into the crowd, impatiently shoving people out of the way, but by the time he reached the spot the fellow had vanished.

Next he searched the tavern, even barging into the back rooms. All he found there were bleary-eyed drunkards contentedly clasped in the arms of harlots. Finally, after nosing around outside once more, Luc had to give up.

Knowing Bratchy as he did, he had suspected him all along, even though he had no proof that the trapper was even *in* Lachine. Nor could he be certain now that the man he had just seen was the trapper.

He sighed, wondering if he was starting to imagine things. He certainly had no intention of allowing Bratchy to prey on his mind; he had enough to concern him as it was. May the plague take him! Luc thought, and shrugged.

But he made a mental note to himself to triple the guard that night.

"Is this some new kind of dance?" Luc chuckled when he came upon Keira hopelessly entangled in about two hundred feet of heavy towline, her hair askew, face and hands bright red and a less than contented glint in her eyes. Nor did she find his comment about dancing very amusing, frustrated as she was.

"I want to work," Keira made quite clear, "but this!" She gazed down at the rope twisted around her ankles and looped over her arm. "It refuses to get straight no matter how I pull and tug. That wee bugger Rawson"

"Tut, tut!" Luc broke in, laughing. "A lady should never swear."

While Keira glared at him, he stepped over the huge coils, quickly disentangled her, and lifted her out of the mess, thinking at the same time how very light she was, hardly heavier than a child. He was instantly annoyed at his manager, but had made it a policy never to interfere unless it was absolutely necessary.

Jasper was exceptionally efficient and good at his job, and though the men didn't like him, he kept them on their toes. Nothing escaped the keen hazel eyes and that was just the way Luc wanted it, though in this case . . .

When Rawson came bouncing over with his ledger under his arm, Duval gave him a hard look. "It would take two *men* to straighten that rope," he growled.

Jasper ignored the rebuke. "She seemed bored," he replied. "And there was nothing else for her to do." Then he inquired boldly, "What sort of work did you have in mind for the young lady?"

The bluntness of the question caught Duval unprepared. Inwardly he felt a stab of anger at Rawson's bluntness, though, he thought with a rueful sigh, he should have expected it from Jasper. There was a moment of awkwardness while his manager stood gazing at him questioningly, and Keira's face flushed a deep pink. Luc cast about trying to think of *something* the girl could do, and spotting the ledger in Jasper's hand, he tossed out, "You can train her to be your assistant."

"What?" This time it was Rawson's turn to be taken aback, something that didn't happen very often. His vexation was obvious when he turned to Keira. "Then you can read and write?" he asked her doubtfully.

"No." Keira shook her head. She was just as startled at Duval's announcement as his accountant was.

Jasper let out a long breath of relief. "Well then," he smiled, "that's an end to it. She cannot possibly assist me if she's illiterate"

"You will teach her to read and write," Luc broke in quietly, but there was a steely edge to his voice and a hardness in his dark eyes that Rawson didn't miss. He knew that look well and the futility of trying to change Duval's mind when it was already made up, so all he

could do was mutter peevishly, "She doesn't even *speak* proper English, so how can she ever learn to read and write it?"

Keira made up her mind then that if it was the last thing she ever did, she would learn to read and write well if only to spite the cheeky wee bantam rooster who had unfortunately joined their clan. Even Duval . . . yes, Keira could sense that he had thrown out the idea just to cover an awkward situation and undoubtedly didn't think she could ever master those skills. She would surprise both of them! Had she not learned to speak the English language quicker than anyone else in Gaelic-speaking Strathvagan? Now she was glad she had. Perhaps some day she would be just as glad she had learned to read and write,

even if the pompous, opinionated Mr. Jasper Rawson continued to balk at the idea of a mere woman working with him.

After supper everyone retired early that night their last in Lachine.

Keira had just started to undress in her tent when the flap suddenly opened and Luc stepped inside. "What do you want?" she asked breathlessly, quickly closing the bodice of her gown. He walked up to her and pushed her hands aside, bent his head and brushed his lips against her warm, firm breast, but when Luc made to draw her close to him, Keira jerked away as if she'd been stung.

"Get out!" she whispered angrily. "I won't make the same mistake again."

In the dull orange glow of her lantern their eyes met and held.

"We won't be disturbed *this* time," he promised, voice low.

Keira could hardly bear to look at him, yet at the same time she couldn't tear her eyes away. A pulse beat frantically at her throat as each shocking detail of

their previous encounter in the tent rose vividly in her mind, every kiss, every caress, the way his lips and teasing fingers had stirred to life some shameful hunger inside her, a terrible, ravenous need that she couldn't control. She could feel that urgent need steal over her now as she stared at him in the lantern light the healthy glow of his tanned skin, the brilliance of his dark eyes, eyes that ignited a fire within her even now, and the strong curved nose and thin, hungry lip every inch of his tall, muscular body like a snare waiting to trap her into forgetting the day of reckoning that would surely come if she were foolish enough to give in to him again.

"Get out!" Keira breathed, backing away a step or two. "The drink the men gave me the other night must have addled my wits, but I don't think it will be repeated." She tried to look cold and stern. "Don't ever touch me again, Luc Duval. I'll work for you, but that's *all* you have a right to expect."

He examined her intently for a moment, then smiled. He was amused at her bluster while at the same time irked at the change in her. "I always finish what I start," he said, "and would not want you to feel, ah . . . neglected or denied."

When he again took a step towards her, Keira climbed on her bedroll to get away. She held up her hands as if to ward him off, and Luc stopped, his expression hard and tight. "What a little fake you are, Keira MacKenzie." He shook his head, adding irritably, "Why do I waste my time"

"Then don't," she hissed, sure the men would hear and know what was going on. "Leave me alone and . . . and never come into my tent again."

His eyes raked over her as Keira stood precariously on her rumpled bedroll clutching the bodice of her blouse together, every nerve in her body alive and jumping, certain Luc would close the distance be-

tween them and seize her and pull her down onto the bed. Then . . . well, then she would be lost. Even as they stood staring at each other like enemies, Keira knew with certainty that she would not be able to resist him once he took her in his arms and that made her desperately angry.

But Luc made no move to touch her. Privately, he was disgusted with himself for succumbing to the urge to see her. It's better this way, he thought. Leave well enough alone.

"Bon soir," he murmured, and lifted the flap of the tent and went out.

Keira sank down on the bed, all the tension ebbing out of her, but she was so weak and shaken that it was several minutes before she had the strength to undress and crawl into the downy comfort of her bedroll and quilt, there to contemplate what the immediate future held for her. She was frightened, most of all at the weakness that lurked within herself.

THE FOREIGNER

10

They left Lachine in the dawn mist and it was even worse than Keira had imagined. Early as it was, the jetty was crowded with the wives, sweethearts, and friends of the men come down to say their goodbyes, with copious weeping, embracing, pleading, and promising going on all about her, while Keira stood among them totally ignored, feeling so frightened, forlorn, and alone that she could have wept.

Not one single person shed a tear for *her*, she thought dismally. Nor would anyone count the days until she returned or even care if she ever returned at all! Duval, by contrast, was surrounded by well-wishers, the men slapping him on the back or shaking his hand, a woman going so far as to kiss and hug him, making good use of the opportunity while it lasted.

Keira turned away and gazed downriver and tried not to care. A cold pearly haze hung over the water, and the tops of fir trees floated in the mist; the path ahead was foggy and obscure, the branches of the

nearby trees rimed with frost. Everything to Keira seemed cold and vague, echoing the feeling inside her. Then Luc was beside her taking her arm. "Don't be frightened," he said. "It won't be forever." He helped her down into one of the three canoes.

Finally, amidst cheering and waving and shouted farewells, Maurice gave the signal and they were away, gliding out into the water like ghosts in the fog. The people crowding the jetty soon vanished from sight, and then the town of Lachine itself. From her place at the center of the middle canoe, Keira watched the paddles rising and falling rhythmically in the silvery water, and it seemed to her that there was something implacable and merciless about those paddles slicing through the water, sweeping her towards the unknown. "It won't be forever," Keira told herself over and over, echoing the words that Duval had said to her on the jetty. "Someday I'll pass this way again on my way back to civilization." Two years, after all, wasn't such a very long time.

As they paddled along the shoreline of Lake St. Louis, Keira shivered in the morning chill and tucked her bright new rug more tightly around her body. Before supper the previous night Jasper Rawson had lined everybody up and given each of them something he called a kit, including one for Keira. The men had opened theirs immediately. Each had received a blanket, a pair of boots, a shirt and trousers, tobacco, and a ration of rum. The latter they would have drunk at once if Rawson hadn't stopped them.

Keira carried her kit quite a large bundle into the privacy of her tent and opened it out on the bed. Her eyes widened at the sight of a heavy woolen skirt and matching cape in a rich shade of forest green. A blue calico gown trimmed with embroidery and a little lace caused her to gasp with delight. There were glistening satin ribbons in all the colors of the rain-

bow, French soap that smelled of wild violets, and a silver brush and comb. And the warm, fur-lined rug.

For a minute her heart soared. She now owned as many fine clothes as the gentry! And soap . . . she raised it to her nose and closed her eyes, breathing in the delicious perfume and imagining how she would feel using *this* in her bath instead of the bland unscented kind that Duval had given her. Duval

Duval!

Stuffing everything back in the wrapping paper, Keira marched right back to Jasper Rawson, her body tight with suspicion. "Why have I been given all these things?" she asked coldly.

"Why indeed, one must ask," came the snide response, though Rawson was a little surprised that she would question anything she'd been given, unless, of course, she felt it wasn't enough.

"Look here, everyone gets a kit at the start of a voyage," he explained. "It's standard procedure, you see. And since you seem to be a member of the crew" his lip curled slightly "you must be provided for too."

Keira was somewhat mollified but still curious. "Who . . . ah . . . chose my kit?"

He threw up his hands. "Dear God, spare me the nuisance of a nosy woman! I suppose you will also want to know how much each item cost, then the name of the store they came from, and so on and so forth? Well, I haven't the time. Can't you see I'm busy? If the kit is not to your satisfaction then you must take it up with Monsieur Duval"

"Oh, it's not that!" Keira interrupted hurriedly. "I *am* satisfied. It's just that . . ."

But Rawson was already hurrying away, shaking his head.

Standard procedure. Keira had actually believed him. But later that night Duval himself had come to

her tent, perhaps expecting her to repay him for his generosity.

If she hadn't been so cold, thought Keira, she would have taken the colorful rug and tossed it over the side of the canoe, and all the rest of her "gifts" with it. Fortunately, Duval wasn't in her canoe. He was in

the lead canoe with Maurice, and the worst she had to contend with was Jasper Rawson sitting directly opposite her, scribbling busily away in his ledger, industrious even while afloat.

Gradually the mist began to lift and tepid sunshine touched the surface of the water, changing the color from gray to a deep, cold green. Here and there on the shore Keira spied a lone homestead and sometimes a cluster of buildings and farm animals, a sign that they hadn't left *all* civilization behind just yet. The three canoes traveled in single file, each rowed by twelve stalwart voyageurs. And now these men, so top-heavy and awkward on land, were perfectly tailored for their function on water, their muscular torsos and arms making the task of rowing a heavy freight canoe loaded with almost four tons of baggage seem easy, the ten-foot oars like mere sticks in their hands.

Keira found the canoes themselves fascinating. They were not just mundane conveyances but real works of art, with striking designs and pictures painted all over them, of birds and animals, even scenes of Indian villages, trees and flowers. Even the oars were vividly decorated in vibrant hues.

On they flew, the high curved prows of each vessel cutting cleanly through the water, the lake as smooth as glass, the air cold and still. Though it was May, the trees were still bare, but budding here and there in spite of the night frosts. Keira found it lulling, even mesmerizing, to watch the paddles rising and falling in unison, and after an hour or two she began to doze. Jasper Rawson lifted his head from his ledger then

and examined her curiously, wondering exactly what she was doing in Luc Duval's life. Typically, Duval had offered no explanation whatsoever.

The girl struck him as being very young and fresh, her skin fine and flawless and rather pale, the silky gold-streaked hair sweeping back cleanly from a point in the middle of her wide forehead and today tied at the nape of her neck with a blue ribbon. She had very regular features, he noted, except that her mouth was a shade too full, the sign, he thought, of a voluptuous nature. Dark, feathery lashes curved softly against her cheeks.

She was very thin and seemed to Rawson exceedingly immature, but there was something about her, perhaps in the set of her mouth, the slant of her eyes, that was highly provocative, even alluring. If she

ever filled out, Jasper found himself thinking as he gazed at her closely, she would be a stunning creature. But now he couldn't imagine what a man with Duval's experience could possibly see in her that would lead him to risk bringing her along on this voyage. At the various trading forts they would visit en route, they would meet many of the wintering partners from the North West Company, and these men, Jasper had to admit, gossiped every bit as much as women. Eventually the juicier tidbits of gossip winged their way back to Montreal, there to be snatched up by the wives of the partners and wildly embellished and dramatized. What would Clarise Menard think, Rawson brooded, when she arrived in Montreal as a bride only to learn that her husband had so recently had another woman in his life, a woman who even traveled into the upcountry with Lucas if he couldn't bear to be separated from her!

For Duval to go so far as to drag this girl into the wilds was a great mistake in other ways too, Jasper reflected. She would never be able to stand the pace,

particularly the grueling hikes on foot during the many portages, necessary to avoid the worst of the rapids. Aside from that, Duval was quite a different man in the hinterlands than he was in town but the girl would find that out soon enough.

Rawson disliked women in general. He had scant patience with them. In his thirty-two years he had found them to be demanding, complaining, and caught up in trivialities. For the man foolish enough to get involved with one it was imperative that he show her from the outset who was in command. In that regard he had no fears about Duval. There wasn't a woman on earth, Jasper felt certain, who would ever get the upper hand with the Frenchman, nor distract him from his goals. Rawson had been with the trader for almost five years and had a very clear idea of what those goals were. In essence, Duval was out to attain everything denied his father: wealth, power, social recognition and nothing and no one would be allowed to interfere with those plans. There was no lasting place in them for Keira MacKenzie, Jasper was positive about that.

He let the girl doze for half an hour, then tapped her on the knee. "Do you know what that letter is?" Rawson asked, holding up a sheet of paper with the alphabet printed in large black letters.

Keira woke with a start to find the seat swaying under her and water all around, and experienced an instant of panic, of disorientation that

made her grab at the plank she was sitting on with both hands, the rug she'd been holding around her slipping from her shoulders. Today she had dressed in the gray leather skirt and jacket, with a blue blouse underneath, her waist-long hair tied back neatly and fastened with a shiny blue ribbon. To Rawson, watching her, she presented a picture of cleanliness and order, and of

that, at least, he approved.

"That letter is an A," he told her. "And the one next to it is a B. In the next day or two I want you to learn all these letters and memorize the entire alphabet. Hopefully, by the time we reach Lake Superior in June, you will be able to read and write simple words."

Keira looked at him, then at the paper in his hand, and, shivering, snuggled down once more inside her fur-lined rug. Cold and ravenously hungry, she was not at all in the mood to begin her lessons, but Jasper Rawson, with an impatient snort, leaned forward and pulled the rug away from under her chin. "Sit up, miss!" he snapped. "And if you know what's good for you, you will pay close attention. I warn you, I don't suffer fools or slothfulness easily, nor does that gentleman in the canoe ahead. I confess I cannot comprehend why Duval wants to educate a woman, but I have my instructions and, by God, I shall carry them through!" Two red spots rose like a stain over his cheekbones as he rapped the paper with an irritable finger. "Repeat these letters after me."

"A," Keira began, stifling a yawn and blinking rapidly to dash the sleep from her eyes, just as determined as Rawson was to succeed at her lessons. She resented his condescending attitude and the annoyance he felt at having to teach her at all, which he didn't try to hide. As for Duval, Keira was convinced that he didn't care whether she learned or not. Rawson had embarrassed him by asking point-blank what role Keira would fill in the clan, and he'd had to say something to cover the awkwardness, she thought, and so blurted out the first thing that popped into his mind.

Duval might not have taken it seriously, mused Keira as she studied the letters that Rawson held out

to her, but *she* had. Finally she had a bona fide job with the company regardless of how it had come about, and she would perform it to the best of her ability. So when Jasper Rawson finally closed his book and announced that lessons Were over for the morning, Keira leaned

forward and tapped him on the knee.

"Tell me more about the firm," she said. "I want to know everything about Western Furs. I also want to know all about the work that *you* do for the firm, Mr. Rawson. Soon, if things go as I think they will, I'll be able to take over some of your duties."

Jasper reared back in his seat. For once he was speechless as he gaped at the beautiful face watching him so intently, her gray eyes bright and alert and filled with a new resolution.

"Goodness gracious!" he gasped. "What have we started here?"

After a brief stop for breakfast, when Keira wolfed down a large plate of beans and a stack of bread that looked more like doughy pancakes, Duval's brigade continued on their way. Speed meant everything to the traders, considering that the summers were so brief and the waterways so rarely free of ice. There would be few or no stops for hunting game on their long voyage west. All of their provisions had been brought with them, simple fare calculated to fill hungry stomachs, much of it starchy and fattening.

After breakfast, to Keira's delight, the voyageurs began to sing at their toil, and rousing singers they were too, launching into one traditional "chanson de voyage" after another while rowing vigorously in time to the music. Fond of music as she was, Keira quickly came to know these tunes, even though they were sung in French. At first she simply hummed along with such

melodies as "La Violette Dandine" and "C'est la Belle Françoise." Then there was the favorite, "A la Claire Fontaine," the first song Keira was to learn to sing in French.

Up along Lake St. Louis they paddled to the western edge of the Island of Montreal, and there they encountered the first of dozens of rapids on their long journey west. The canoes were pulled in to shore, the heavy loads placed on the strong backs of the voyageurs, and the entire crew and baggage, including the canoes themselves, were carried up a height of land to avoid the raging river with its steep banks and sharp rocks.

Keira quickly found the trail exhausting, even with only her clothes sack to carry. She glanced at the men, sweating profusely and scarlet in the face, and her heart went out to them, particularly the voyageurs lugging the canoes. Duval himself was loaded up like a packhorse.

"Stay close to me," he had ordered Keira at the start of the portage, "and try hard to keep up."

Eventually, when Keira felt she couldn't take another step, they were able to continue on by water. By then her appearance was no longer neat. Her boots and skirt were spattered with mud, the hem dripping icy water on her legs. Long tendrils of her hair had come loose and stuck to her sweating cheeks, and her hands were scratched and bleeding from clinging onto tree branches and rocks on the long climb uphill. But never once did Keira reach out to Duval for help and support, or beg him to stop so that she could rest. She felt him looking at her now and then, and at such times she whipped herself on to new effort. Already she was beginning to sense that it was every man for himself on the portages, and Keira wanted no special favors just because she was a woman, especially none from Luc Duval. "You did well," he told her gruffly when they climbed back into the canoes. "Perhaps

next time I'll give you one of the bales to carry," he teased.

"As you wish," Keira replied blandly.

The chiming of bells welcomed them to the village of Ste. Anne's with its cluster of whitewashed wooden houses and small Gothic church. Here, as was the custom, the voyageurs stopped to pray, asking God to grant their party a safe and profitable journey. Each man offered up a small donation, then once more they were on their way, the singing of the crew the only sound to break the pristine silence.

Keira's heart turned cold when they came upon the foaming mouth of the Ottawa River and the Long Sault Rapids. Again they went through the tedious process of unloading the canoes and portaging the baggage on foot. Some of the bales the men carried weighed two hundred pounds or more, Keira discovered later, and with such loads on their backs they trudged up narrow hill trails and scrambled over gigantic rocks, then down into muddy muskegs that sucked at their boots and upset their balance. But not a word of complaint passed their lips as they trudged on under a cold blue sky and past leafless birch and aspen trees that swayed and creaked a lonely sound in the chilly wind, and Keira struggled to do the same. It was fortunate, she thought, that she had grown up in the Highlands of Scotland with its rugged mountains and wild terrain, or she'd never have been able to withstand this hardship. But even Scotland, by the time the month of May arrived, had gentled, the trees in leaf and the glens lush and

green, while here she looked about her in dismay the grim hand of winter seemed reluctant to release its grip. In some places the bogs were edged with a fine lacing of ice and the higher hills were still crowned with snow. As long as they kept moving, Keira felt warm enough,

but the moment they paused, she could feel the wind freezing the sweat on her face and cutting through her clothes to chill her to the bone.

Late that afternoon they made camp on the banks of the Ottawa, or the Grand River, as the voyageurs called it. Only a famishing hunger kept Keira awake long enough to bolt down her food, then she staggered to her tent, tore off her clothes, and fell upon her bed, thinking that she could bathe in the morning. Snuggling under her downy quilt even as the voyageurs curled up in their blankets under upturned canoes, it occurred to Keira that even Jasper Rawson had been too fatigued that night to bother about her lessons. Reminding herself of her vow to do well, she started reciting the alphabet aloud. "A-B-C-D . . ."

It seemed to Keira that she had only been asleep for minutes when she heard a cry ring throughout the camp: "C'est l'heure à se lever!" Before five o'clock in the morning she had to drag her aching body out of its soft, warm nest and bathe her shrinking flesh in icy water. Naturally, Keira expected breakfast, only to find that it wouldn't be forthcoming until later. After hastily breaking camp, they were again on the river. How Keira came to hate that endless waterway with its fickle moods, its cataracts, waterfalls, and foaming rapids, all of which meant the back-breaking toil of portaging the baggage around it. Sometimes even the men rebelled at the idea and, when it wasn't too dangerous, "shot" the rapids amid shouts and cheers, and from Keira, screams of terror.

But gradually, after the first few hundred miles, Keira began to get used to the strenuous routine and to know what was expected of her. Though Duval wouldn't allow her to help transport the goods at the portages, Keira quickly learned to pitch her own tent at night, to fetch her own water, and to help with the cooking. All her aches and pains disappeared, and

soon she felt fit and energetic, eager to assist the clan in any way she could. By the time they crossed Lake Nipissing and the French River

swept them into the stunning grandeur of Georgian Bay, Keira was also helping collect the nightly firewood and adding her bit to the after-supper entertainment with the songs and poetry of her native Scotland. Inevitably, the men would clamor to see her dance, and with a defiant glance at Duval, Keira usually obliged. Long before they reached Lake Superior and Fort William, Keira had taught many of the men the songs and dances of her homeland, and some of the lingo too. On the nights when they weren't too tired the camp would ring with laughter and merriment as the ungainly voyageurs tried to follow Keira's instructions, bobbing and stumbling through a reel or attempting the intricacies of the Sword Dance.

Keira felt almost happy at such times, her first feeling of alienation and isolation of being different gradually fading away. Little by little she began to feel a closeness, a warmth and sympathy for this strange clan that she was now a part of once she started to understand their ways. The men were good to her, kind and considerate in their rough, easygoing way; even Jasper Rawson seemed resigned to having her among them. Jasper, always brisk, was polite enough as long as Keira kept up with her lessons and the fast pace he had set for her. As she had requested, he did his best to explain the workings of the company and his own role in the firm, then what hers might be provided she learned her lessons well. Keira noticed that he approved of her independent spirit, her eagerness to pull her own weight, and the fact that she never complained, no matter how hard the going or how great her discomfort over the many portages they had to make.

By now they had left all traces of civilization far behind. Daily the birch-bark canoes swept them across lake after lake, and along numerous rivers, few of which had a name. It constantly astounded Keira that the voyageurs knew exactly where they were going and never lost their way through the confusing maze of waterways that led them ever deeper into the west. When the rivers were too rocky or turbulent to navigate, they tramped through virgin forests of aspen and pine, all the trees in leaf now and the undergrowth almost impenetrable. All about them hung a primeval hush. The crystalline air sparkled. Glimpsing a shy silver fox watching them in astonishment from the woods, and a bear playing with her cubs, Keira couldn't help but respond to the unspoiled beauty of nature around them.

In spite of the deep sense of loss that she still felt inside her, there were moments when happiness came in sudden bursts of pleasure. She had never felt so fit and unrestrained in her life; her cheeks bloomed

and her blood sang, and sometimes . . . sometimes she burst out laughing for no special reason, just out of a sense of sheer exhilaration, laughter quickly checked when she saw Duval watching her.

There was not a single moment of the day when Keira was not aware of him. He filled her senses and quickened her blood, lightened her step and brought a soft radiance to her expression. Across the campfire at night they stared at each other through the orange flames, neither willing to acknowledge the growing hunger they felt for each other.

One day, irked by Keira's continued aloofness, Luc said, "You don't seem *too* displeased by the situation and might at least be civil and stop treating me like an ogre. At the very least you should be grateful for my protection."

"Protection!" She laughed sarcastically. "Is that why you bought my bond, just so you could protect me?"

He looked away. "Yes, better me than Seth Bratchy."

"Oh, surely you don't expect me to thank you for turning me into a slave?" Keira scoffed.

Luc caught her arm and held her there until the men had gone ahead of them through the portage, then he said angrily, "For a slave you seem to have a considerable amount of freedom"

"But not the freedom to go my own way!" Keira shot back, aware even as she uttered the words that she was being unreasonable, since she had no money of her own or anywhere to go even if he *did* turn her loose. But always there lurked in her an urge to provoke him, so she added, "I warn you, Duval, that neither you nor any other man will be my master. I won't be ordered about or dictated to ever again. That's a promise I made to myself at the time I left Scotland, and I mean to keep it," she finished with a toss of her head.

The rest of the team had disappeared around a bend in the track, leaving them standing alone at the edge of the woods.

"Many women find it pleasant to be mastered," Luc pointed out sardonically, his dark eyes burning down into hers. "You will too . . . in the right man's arms."

"Never!" Keira retorted, her peachy skin flaming at what his words implied. "I don't care for the sort of man who feels the need to control"

Suddenly Luc pulled her into his arms and kissed her with a passion that made her senses blur and her legs fold beneath her. To stop herself from falling, Keira's arms rose to encircle his neck and she felt the urgent hardness of his body press against her own as they stood in the shadow of the forest, the branches of

the trees swaying overhead, the river roaring and hissing between giant rocks far below.

Luc, like most of the men, had noticed the change in Keira over the past few weeks. Now he *felt* the change in the firm, full breasts crushed against his chest and the new roundness to her hips beneath his right hand. The touch of her inflamed him. Now it was that much more difficult to deny the growing need in his own body; that much more difficult to honor the pledge he had made. He could no longer dredge up a clear picture of Clarise in his mind, but *this* woman Keira was vividly in his thoughts night and day, her face imprinted even in his dreams.

Recklessly, and he could no longer control the towering desire inside him, Luc started to pull Keira deeper into the woods when he suddenly raised his head and from the trees on the other side of the river he spied a curl of smoke drifting into the late afternoon sky. He froze.

For some time now Luc had suspected that they were being followed, and nightly slept with a loaded gun at his side. He had privately warned his men to stay alert, at the same time taking pains not to alarm Keira. Luc suspected that it could be Seth Bratchy, though he couldn't discount the possibility of marauding Indians coveting their canoes and supplies. It might even be that madman Astor, he reflected, a man who presented two altogether different faces to the world. Astor had asked Keira to marry him, Luc remembered, and, ridiculous as that was since the German hardly knew her, still, Astor's compulsive nature was such that he might well have meant it. Now he could be fixated on wresting the object of his sick passion away from Luc's party.

For all the precautions and the ploys they had set to trap him, they never actually *saw* the man stalking them. All they heard and saw was the occasional

rustling in the woods, the strange call of a "bird" or "animal" in the twilight, and, like now, the spiraling smoke from a campfire wafting above the trees.

"What's the matter?" whispered Keira, feeling his sudden tension.

Then she too saw the smoke. "Who can it be? You seem . . . worried."

Luc squeezed her hand reassuringly, and his face cleared. "Just curious, but I think we'll pay him a visit and find out who he is."

He hurried Keira up the trail and in minutes they caught up with the rest of their party. It was late afternoon by then and time to make camp for the night, but Luc knew he would not rest easy until he had discovered the identity of the man or men in the other campsite.

He left half his crew to guard Keira and set off across the river with the other half, all of them heavily armed. When they reached the place where the fire had been, the ashes were still warm, but the site was deserted.

11

"Schweinhund!" Freddy Astor screamed at his Iroquois guide, and clubbed him over the head with the butt of his rifle.

As the rest of the crew struggled in the river to save their remaining canoe and rescue what they could of the trade goods and provisions, Astor, his lips foaming in fury, struck his guide again and pitched him stunned and bleeding into the river, bellowing in German, "I hope you drown, you imbecile! Save that canoe or I'll have you tied to a stake and burned alive. Get in there!" he rushed into the shallows and kicked and pushed the hapless Indian into deeper water where a torrent poured over jagged rocks, swirling and hissing as it roared over a small cataract, carrying most of their trade goods with it. After a brief and futile struggle, it swept their Iroquois guide downstream, and the last they saw of him were his arms and legs flailing wildly above the white water. Then he sank out of sight.

They were on the Upper Ottawa, just below the island of Calumet, a vicious stretch of river that had brought disaster to many a brigade before Astor's, as the rude crosses lining the banks attested, standing stark and somber in the shadows of early evening. Enraged as the rest of the party stood gazing in horror after the unfortunate guide, Astor

took out his pistol and sent a shot winging over their heads. "You will join him," he yelled to them, "if that canoe is lost."

Then he sat down on a knoll above the river, his pistol cocked, quite prepared to shoot any man who left the water empty-handed.

Misfortune had dogged Freddy Astor's footsteps from the start. Even before he left Lachine he was in trouble. The night after the attack on Keira and Luc, Freddy too had been set upon, beaten senseless, stripped down to the money belt he wore next to his skin, and robbed of every cent he had.

The culprit or culprits remained a mystery. That evening Freddy, rather the worse for drink, had availed himself of the services of one of the many poules in Mungo's Tavern, and while staggering back to the river campsite he shared with Bratchy and LeMoy, had been struck a stunning blow from behind. He hadn't caught as much as a glimpse of his assailant. There he had lain in the reeds until dawn when a young voyageur from another camp had found him. Bratchy and Lemoy had come running to carry him back to their own camp, and there they had ministered to him kindly, sighing, "You should not have gone to that wholesome tavern. It's well known that the strumpets there work with robbers. Ah, but how could you know, having scant knowledge of the district?" They had held a bottle to his lips then, urging him to drink. "'Twill dull the ache in your head and help you forget your sorrows."

But no amount of cheap brandy had been able to

make Freddy forget the predicament he was in. Precisely half the money John Jacob had advanced him was gone, and it was a sizable sumcash meant to be used to hire an experienced crew of voyageurs, buy canoes, purchase trade goods for bartering with the Indians and provisions for the men for the trip west. Gone! Yes, and through his own carelessness too! Freddy knew he didn't dare send word back to Astor, a man who tolerated no excuses; a man who had warned him what would happen if he failed.

But . . . Freddy had still to receive the other half of the money his cousin had promised to send him before he left Lachine, and with that, he told himself glumly, he would somehow have to make do. Of course it would mean cutting corners; it would mean purchasing at least one less canoe, a poorer class of voyageur and fewer of them, an inferior guide and interpreter, and far less trade goods for bartering

along the way. As for himself . . . there would be no luxuries whatsoever to ease the rough passage, no smoked sturgeon, partridge, or salmon, no fine brandy or Madeira to be sipped while smoking a Havana cigar by the campfire at night. Freddy's spirits sank even lower when he thought of the forts they would visit en route, places where he had hoped to impress the wintering partners stationed there with his fine new clothes, and the women who always hung about such places with little gifts. He had hoped to travel in style, as befitted the cousin of John Jacob Astor, but . . .

Freddy had a powerful urge to take the rest of Astor's money and run, to vanish with it into oblivion. Almost at once he knew it wouldn't work. Astor had connections everywhere, even overseas, and he was the sort of individual, as Freddy well knew, who would not rest until the thief had been found and mercilessly punished, and finally and irrevocably dumped.

The day after the attack, Bratchy and LeMoy announced that they were leavine Lachine. "We've tarried here long enough," explained LeMoy, the more talkative of the two, "and now business calls us onward. But we'll leave the rest of the food and what's left of the rum so you won't go hungry or thirsty while you seek employment."

Bratchy said, "A man with your connections will have no trouble whatsoever, though I can't understand why you don't return to New York and seek help from your cousin."

Freddy looked at them dourly and with some suspicion. He didn't enlighten them as to why he couldn't go limping back to his cousin, nor had he mentioned the money he was expecting. Though he had no proof, he felt there was more than a slight chance that Bratchy and LeMoy had been the robbers, but he could do nothing about it without risking a fight in which he would have been outnumbered.

To Freddy's disgust, both men shook hands with him before they departed, LeMoy leaving with the sly comment, "Let us hope our paths cross again, my friend. We count ourselves much the richer from having made your acquaintance."

And leaving Freddy to mull over that possible double entendre they bade him farewell.

The moment the rest of the money came in from New York, Astor hurried out in search of a crew. As he'd surmised, the best voyageurs turned up their noses at the wages he was prepared to pay them, and

in the end he had to settle for a motley bunch made up of Indians and burned-out French-Canadians, the latter the types forced for financial reasons to take "one last trip." In their second-hand canoes, two vessels that had already seen much service on the waterways, and led by an alcoholic Iroquois who quite rightly blamed the white man for his addiction, they

left Lachine two days after Duval's brigade had departed. Freddy was determined to make up the time. From the moment he had first seen her, the beautiful Highland lass had never been out of his mind. Heated visions of Keira dancing kept him awake at night, tossing and sweating in the darkness of his tent, sometimes, in his dreams, her sweet form lying naked in his arms, her face that of an angel, her body that of a harlot.

From the outset Astor had problems with his crew, a surly, disgruntled lot who frequently pretended they didn't understand his instructions, blaming the misunderstandings on his heavy German accent. When he came upon two of the Frenchmen snickering and mocking the way he spoke, Freddy flew into one of his sudden rages and beat them until they howled for mercy. After that they rarely spoke to him at all unless compelled to, but their sullen expressions and the animosity in their eyes left Freddy in no doubt as to how they felt about him. Soon they demonstrated that dislike in other ways too.

One night he found a dead skunk in his tent, and on another occasion a snake in his boot. Naturally, nobody knew how they had come to be there. A bale of his precious trade goods disappeared, and even a search of the camp failed to unearth even one of the missing items. Then a keg of rum somehow sprung a leak, and water seeped into the flour, but above the Carillon Rapids something far more serious occurred, something potentially crippling to Astor's plans.

A few hundred feet from the rapids one of the canoes somehow overturned, pitching both men and supplies into the water. The baggage sank immediately, even as the men swam for the opposite shore. The canoe, flipping over and over, was sucked into the torrent and dashed to pieces on the rocks below, and the twelve voyageurs in charge of the craft promptly

deserted and vanished into the woods on the other side of the river.

Freddy, stricken, stood on the riverbank and wept. Forced to continue on with only one canoe and half his original manpower, his mood

sank to a level approximating that of the remaining men. Why, he brooded as he sat drinking alone at the campfire that night, was life always so hard on him? No matter *how* great his ambition and endeavor, fate continued to laugh in his face.

"We will not turn back!" he suddenly screamed at the men, startling them. "Banish *that* idea from your minds. You signed on for the duration of the voyage and there is only one way you will break that contract." Astor pulled his pistol from its holster and flourished it at them, adding, "Death, in one way or another, will be your only release."

No one said a word, nor were they surprised at Freddy's irrational behavior. From past experience they knew that men often behaved irrationally in the wilds. It was part and parcel of the territory. In the rigors of the upcountry a man rapidly found himself stripped bare of any pretensions and vanities he might harbor about himself and others, and the stark truth was often very painful to endure. Some dulled their wits with alcohol. Others drove themselves on to reckless feats of bravery and endurance, or, conversely, allowed themselves to sink into a morass of cruelty, cowardice, and depravity. Men went mad in the wilderness. Suicide was common. There were some who turned to crime, and the very remoteness and lawlessness of the area appealed strongly to individuals with a psychotic streak in their nature.

The voyageurs had seen it all, the heights and depths of human nature, and with another leader they might have been sympathetic or at least tolerant, but not with Freddy Astor. From the beginning he had

treated them like trash. His manner had been cold and superior, critical and harsh and sneeringly condescending, even though they knew the route they were taking far better than he did. Most damning of all in their eyes, he was no leader. Very quickly they sensed his deep-seated uncertainty and instability, his lack of confidence in himself, a lack he covered up by browbeating others. Thereupon the crew lost all respect for him.

It was their guide, the Indian, who cracked the explosive atmosphere by saying to Astor, "What you need is woman."

Everybody burst out laughing, and even Freddy relaxed and smiled, nodding, "Ja . . ." then with more feeling, "Jawohl! But a very *special*

woman."

The next day, just beyond the island of Calumet, they had the mishap with their remaining canoe, which Astor blamed on the poor judgment of their Iroquois guide. There had been a moment in the boiling white water when Freddy was sure they were all going to drown, but somehow he had managed to claw his way to shore and salvage a box of ammunition, the gunpowder inside carefully wrapped in oilcloth against just such an accident, all too common in the waterways of the West. When the men straggled out after him, few with anything in their arms, Astor turned on them with a snarl and drove them back into the torrent to save the canoe and what they could of the baggage.

They fled at once, all except the guide, who continued to lie panting for breath on the muddy riverbank, and on the Indian Freddy vented most of his rage, blaming him for leading them into a section of the river that was not safe to navigate. It was only when the Iroquois disappeared from sight in the rapids that it occurred to Astor that perhaps he had been a little hasty.

Now, as he sat on the knoll watching six of the men struggling to pull the canoe out of the violent current, Freddy belatedly asked himself what they would do without a guide, not to mention an interpreter. He felt a touch of uneasiness, even though he knew that others of the crew were familiar with the route, at least as far as Lake Superior. But none that he knew of spoke more than a word or two of the many Indian languages hereabouts, and that could spell grave trouble.

The canoe and less than half of the remaining supplies were saved, the latter spread out to dry on the knoll above the river. The men glared hard at Freddy, but none spoke to him. Their camp that night was eerily silent as they consumed a tasteless meal of beans and gruel and immediately afterwards the men retired, leaving Astor sitting alone at the dying fire.

Freddy wanted to shout that *he* had not been to blame for the accident that had started all the trouble in the first place, but he took a long swallow from a bottle of rum instead. Simmering, he failed to understand how they could blame him for losing his temper with the guide, considering the importance of the mission they were embarked on, not to mention all the expense that had gone into it. He was deeply sorry that the Indian had drowned. That went without saying. But it was *not his fault!* Why, therefore, were they picking on him, ganging up on him and piling all the blame on his shoulders, selecting

him to be a scapegoat for their own shortcomings? "Pah!" he spat, "what else can one expect from ignorant scum?"

Eventually he too stumbled into his tent and thankfully passed out at once. When he woke up the next morning, Astor found himself alone in the camp. The canoe and all the supplies except a small bundle of food were gone, and even that small bundle had been placed directly on top of a pile of human excrement.

Astor flew to the edge of the water and screamed and swore until he could scream no more, then he battered his head against the nearest tree and finally slumped down on the ground, sobbing. He was doomed. They might just as well have shot him. With that thought in mind he sat up and drew his pistol out of its holster and touched the muzzle to his temple, closed his eyes, and curled a finger around the trigger. Then a vision of *her* rose in his mind, teasing eyes and seductive smile. Jezebel or Madonna, he wasn't sure which, but Keira was beckoning to him, waving him onwards.

Freddy lowered the gun to his lap, leaned back against the tree, and pursed his lips. Yes, he sighed, pure or vile he wanted her. And if he had to follow her to the ends of the earth, he would have her!

He felt the familiar dark power flow back into his mind to strengthen him, a power that had stood him in good stead in the past when things had seemed hopeless. They *weren't* hopeless! They never could be, because he was a ruthless survivor quite prepared to resort to anything when his back was up against the wall or when determined to take what he wanted. Besides, he was completely at home in the wilderness; he still had his pistol and knives and a box of ammunition, some of which he could use to barter a canoe out of the Indians in the area. He also had a keg of brandy stashed away, and a snug tent to sleep in at night. As for his mission for John Jacob, well . . . he had one of his own that was more important to him. The only drawback Freddy could see was the Frenchman, Luc Duval.

Luc met Keira on her way back to camp with a bundle of firewood in her arms. From now on, he said, she had to stay in camp and leave François and Jean to fetch the wood. At the risk of frightening her a little,

he reminded Keira that there were snakes and wild animals in the forest, not to mention a host of stinging insects, something they had been plagued with recently now that the weather had become

suddenly much warmer.

Keira's face fell. She enjoyed her evening walk, the peace and solitude of being by herself in the country-side. It was the only time, other than when she was in bed, when she wasn't surrounded by people, and the voyageurs were a noisy lot who seemed to feel that silence was a vice.

She looked at him curiously. "Is anything wrong? I mean, is there some special reason why I shouldn't go off by myself?"

"No, no." Luc shook his head, thinking that the last thing he needed was a jittery woman, shrieking every time she saw her own shadow. There had been quite enough aggravations over the past few weeks as it was. One of his best men had broken his wrist and couldn't row. Another had been stung by some insect and for days had lain delirious, trembling on the brink of death, then surprised them all by making a sudden recovery, though he had been left with a horror of insects in general and there were millions plaguing them now going so far as to leap from the canoe whenever one landed on him, upsetting the craft in the process. Half a dozen times one or another of the canoes had overturned, resulting in the loss of close to a quarter of their supplies. Then as they left the rapids of St. Mary behind and entered a rugged wasteland of cliffs and gorges and dark forests, with Lake Superior up ahead, another problem raised its pestilential head: superstition.

Luc had warned the men against even *mentioning* the word Wendigo in front of Keira. Or Manitou or Inini-Wudjoo either. But when they made camp now, he had noticed the change in their behavior the fact

that they were unusually subdued, and sat in a close circle around the fire which they kept blazing brightly, all the while throwing uneasy glances over their shoulders into the woods. The howl of a wolf or yip of a coyote was enough to make them start up in alarm, though they had been listening to the nightly chorus of these creatures for the past several weeks and had hardly bothered to raise their heads.

Once or twice lately Keira had tried to interest them in a sing-song or dance, but they had always made the excuse that they were tired. Luc had taken Jasper Rawson aside, saying, "Keep her occupied with the books. She's starting to notice the difference in them, so pile on the lessons. She's been amazingly courageous so far, but let's not test our luck."

Now, as they walked back to camp, Keira remarked, "I've been out every evening collecting wood for weeks, so why, all of a sudden, must I stop now?"

"Because I asked you to," Luc replied sharply, driven to distraction by the ridiculous antics of the crew, most of whom were convinced that evil spirits haunted the area they were passing through. There had indeed been many deaths and disappearances in the region, but due to nature's hazards rather than the supernatural, Luc was convinced. Even Maurice, however, disagreed with him, pointing out that the Indians who had always lived here believed as they did, that something dark and sinister prowled the territory, claiming that some of their braves had seen this hideous specter and promptly gone mad with terror.

"Can you not *feel* it?" Maurice had whispered as they sat smoking on a ridge at sunset the previous evening, the splendor of nature all around them, untrammelled and unspoiled—the deep green of the forests, the purple-blue river with towering gray cliffs on either side, and the evening sky lemon-yellow,

fading to a deep rose in the west. "It's all about us," Maurice had gone on, a tremor in his voice. "Something big . . . very big and all-powerful. To see it is to die!"

And in the eerie afterglow of the sunset, for just a second, Luc *had* felt something, or imagined he did, but the next minute he knew exactly what that something was: Maurice's quivering body shaking the fallen tree limb they were sitting on.

"Let's go back to camp?" his *gouvernail* pleaded, and, without waiting for an answer, flew down the slope in the direction of the fire.

Luc watched him in disgust. It was always like this when they reached certain parts of the route, and he came to dread these parts almost as much as his crew. Not because of the Wendigo or Bad-Manitou, but because the irrational behavior of his men caused him constant headaches.

Of course that was no excuse for taking his impatience out on Keira, he chided himself as they walked back to camp together. Luc glanced down at her from the corner of his eye, that eye moving from her flawless profile mulishly stubborn at present, he noted down over the lush and tantalizing fullness of her breasts. How she had blossomed! Weeks of rich, nourishing food, fresh air, and exercise had wrought an

astounding change in the girl, or woman as Keira seemed to him now. All the men adored her, for her vivacity, her sparkling gaiety and ready laughter as much as for her beauty. They admired her spirit, the fact that she never complained or asked for any special favors, regardless of how rough the going became. Even Jasper Rawson was being won over, Luc thought wryly, possibly because Keira made *him* look good, quick as she was to master the work he gave her to do. She had turned what would have been a dull, routine journey, one they had taken many times

before, into something special and exciting . . . especially for Luc.

He would have trusted Keira implicitly with ninety percent of his men, the ones who had been with him for years. But there were one or two . . .

Luc stopped and turned her to face him. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be so curt," he said. "But I can't afford to risk any more accidents or delays. I would prefer it if you stayed in the camp from now on, for the reasons I already explained."

When their eyes met, Keira felt her annoyance crumble under a stronger emotion. She forgot the firewood, his warning about wild animals, and the fact that he was trying to curtail her one small private pleasure by denying her her walk. Everything melted away while they stood in silence gazing at each other, and Keira felt the angry seething of her mind grow still, a hush fall over the woods around them, a crackling tension fill the air. She saw him with an astonishing clarity that was missing when she looked at otherthe sprinkling of gold-dust in his dark brown eyes, the tiny scar at the right side of his mouth, so pearly white against the deep bronze of his skin. His features, she saw, were all well defined and had great character, the nose with its slight hook aristocraticif a little cruel! His mouth, that hard, sensuous mouth, softer now as Luc gazed at her with a luminous warm glow in his eyes, his feelings, for once, quite naked.

Keira felt a breathless surge of elation that shook her to her very core. She felt intense joy, a heady sense of power, an acute perception of her own worth, all these things made suddenly clear to her through the glow in Luc Duval's eyes. It made her feel strong, and at the same time weak. It filled her with a blazing happiness, yet a frightening feeling of confusion. There were no choices involved. Keira saw that at

once. No *rightness* to this at all, no good, logical reasons why she should feel so . . . so totally overwhelmed by a man who in essence owned her and to whom she was a servant, at best.

Luc shifted the load of firewood he had taken from her to his left arm, and put the other around her shoulders. They were standing on a little ridge directly above the camp, in full view of the men, several of whom were watching them curiously, undoubtedly wondering what they were up to, thought Luc wishing that he had come upon Keira farther back in the woods. And if he had . . . ?

She would not have resisted. He knew that with certainty. The moment had been right; an electrifying urgency had surged between them; he had all but grabbed her and carried her back into the forest because he had wanted her and still did with a passion that he had never experienced with another woman, and it was *that* the realization of how much he wanted her, of how much she had come to mean to him that had held him back.

When she felt his arm go around her, Keira raised her face to his, her eyes wide and questioning, and she seemed very young again to Luc, and very vulnerable. He masked his own turbulent emotions with a smile, saying lightly, "Did your mother never warn you about what happens to little girls who stray into the woods?"

Keira searched his face, a face that was closed to her now. Had she imagined that tenderness, she asked herself, that special warmth in his eyes? Perhaps she had . . . perhaps she had because she wanted to . . . because she yearned to have him reveal some affection for her, a response that matched her own.

Her emotions plummeted. First came resentment, then fury, a fear that she might have betrayed herself to those experienced dark eyes.

"I'm not a little girl!" Keira snapped, and jerked herself free of the arm about her. "And I think I've demonstrated by now that I can take care of myself."

"You have many fine qualities," Luc replied gravely, feeling her hurt. "And no, you are not a little girl, but a very beautiful woman. *Very* beautiful," he repeated, at the same time careful to keep his tone bland.

Keira felt ridiculously pleased at the compliment then was suddenly furious at herself for being so, because his praise sounded so

dispassionate and offhand; he might have been remarking about the scenery or the wildflowers at their feet. So she didn't bother to thank him. Instead, she hurried away ahead of Luc and disappeared into the close confines of her tent, where at least she could cry in private.

Later, as they ate their evening meal by the fire, Keira noticed in a vague way that the men seemed uncommonly quiet and subdued, and it struck her that they had been like that for several days now. But when she happened to glance to the other side of the fire and her eyes clashed with Duval's, Keira instantly forgot about the men and their somber mood and asked herself if she was *really* going to allow Luc Duval to dictate her every move.

His reasons for ordering her to confine herself to camp sounded very lame to Keira. François had already assured her that wild animals avoided contact with humans and gave them a wide berth. As for stinging insects, well, there were far more of the pests hanging about the camp where the food was than she ever encountered on her wood-collecting jaunts. Duval's reasons for confining her activities simply didn't hold water especially as he had allowed her to collect wood for weeks now without as much as saying a word to dissuade her.

Then, thinking of François, everything suddenly fell

into place in her mind. Only a few nights before, the young voyageur had met up with her in the woods and they had walked back to camp together, laughing and joking about an amusing incident that had happened earlier that day on the river. Perhaps they had tarried too long in the forest, or perhaps Duval had resented the fun they were having, but whatever it was, he had angrily reprimanded François on their return, accusing him of wasting his time supposedly "helping" Keira when he had real work requiring his attention.

Perhaps Luc was jealous of François.

Once more Keira's spirits soared, even as she scolded herself for being foolish; even when she tried to convince herself that she didn't care whether Luc was jealous of François or not. She decided then she even smiled defiantly at Luc as he sat watching her that she would continue to take her walks and enjoy her rare moments of privacy, and Luc Duval could do whatever he liked!

Almost eight weeks after they left Lachine, Luc's brigade entered the northeastern end of Lake Superior. The lake was an awesome sight to Keira. It was more like an inland sea. Here it was colder too, especially the nights, and extra blankets had to be piled onto the beds to keep people from freezing. The terrain all around the lake was extremely rugged and wild and hauntingly beautiful. It was hard for Keira to imagine anyone actually living for any length of time amid such silence and remoteness, though Jasper informed her that there were several Indian tribes in the area and several trading forts too, chief among them Fort William, the North West Company's main depot.

"You are in for an interesting experience at Fort William," he told her, a peculiar little glint in his eyes. "We'll spend about a week there to rest up and enjoy some recreation before continuing on to Athabasca Country."

"How long will it take us to reach Athabasca Country?" Keira asked, feeling much like a roving gypsy by this time, but thoroughly enjoying the freedom and exhilaration and even the daily challenges they encountered along the way, a journey she had once dreaded.

She was startled when Rawson replied that it would take them about two and a half months to reach Luc's main trading fort on Lake Athabasca, over fifteen hundred miles from where they were. "If you think this is remote, wait till you see Fort Arrowhead," he chuckled. "Only the most daring would dream of setting foot there." Then he added something that gave Keira quite a thrill. "I think that you, my dear, will have the distinction of being the first white woman to touch Lake Athabasca, or certainly one of a very few. I personally know of no others."

Keira could have hugged him. Without realizing it, he had told her that Luc Duval had never taken another woman to his fort, and that made her unreasonably happy, yes, even while she tried to make herself believe that it didn't matter to her whether he had or not. All she could think of was that Duval was single and free, that regardless of how they truly felt about each other there was no other woman in his life, just as there was no other man in hers. And that too made Keira unreasonably happy. "What if I love him?" she asked herself breathlessly later on as she lay wide awake and restless inside her tent, quiveringly aware of Luc in his not thirty feet away. "What if I really do love him?"

She rolled the delicious word "love" around and around in her head, the first time she had allowed herself to think of it in connection with Luc Duval, and now that she had, it electrified Keira, sending a bolt of heart-stopping excitement flashing through her body. At that moment she knew that it was true, and

whispered tremulously, "I *do* love him!" Then, "I do! I do! Oh, I really do!"

She was swamped with a host of powerful emotions—sheer joy, fear, uncertainty, elation. But most of all, surprise. Why, of all the men in the world, should she love this particular one? It made no sense to Keira whatsoever. It flew in the face of everything logical and sensible—flew in the face of what she'd *imagined* she wanted for herself, which certainly wasn't a man like Luc Duval!

Suddenly, curled up in her quilt, hugging the wondrous revelation to her, Keira buried her face in the pillow to stifle the laughter that bubbled up inside her like a fountain, delight she couldn't contain. She loved him. But

Did he love her?

Keira sobered instantly when she remembered that there was another side to the equation, and that side she couldn't figure out at all. True, Luc was more than eager to make love to her, as he had already demonstrated. But Keira knew that for a man in particular making love and *being* in love could be quite separate processes. She knew also that for her the two had to go together. The thought of a man taking her body and rejecting the rest of her was appalling.

Once it seemed a lifetime ago now she had thought she loved a boy called Thomas Kennedy. But then fate had torn her up by the roots, stripped her of everything she had known and loved, and hurled her across an ocean to a land of strangers. There she had been forced to begin a new life full of new and often frightening experiences, and the girl she had once been had vanished, a woman emerging in her place, and the woman told her that she had never loved Tam Kennedy; in fact, that she had never known the meaning of love at all then.

Luc Duval was an enigma and a challenge, but her

life had been nothing *but* challenges since she'd set foot in North America. Perhaps he would be the toughest she had had to face, but

face him she would!

Keira had not ventured out of the camp in the evening for over a week. Each late afternoon when they pulled into shore she had been very conscious of Luc watching her to make sure she didn't stray. But the last day or two he had relaxed his vigil, taking it for granted now, she thought, that she would continue to obey him.

The very next evening Keira slipped away when Luc and the men were repairing one of the canoes with watape and meticulously caulking the leaks in the seams with spruce gum, a procedure that took time and much patience. Supper was over and she made as if to go to her tent, then suddenly darted into the woods, a cool, hushed green world pregnant with mystery. As she hurried away deeper into the forest, Keira giggled a little, constantly glancing back over her shoulder, wondering how long it would take before Luc realized that she was missing.

She knew he would come searching for her by himself. She *knew*! And when he found her? Well, they would just have to wait and see.

The evening was cool, crisp and clear, just the way he liked it, the air so fresh and pure it seared the lungs. The perfume of balsam and pine teased his nostrils, and the dark, somehow erotic scent of the earth, the woodsy odor of hundreds of thousands of years of fallen conifer needles, added their tang to nature's bouquet.

With his back propped comfortably against a tree, a mug of brandy in his hand, he contemplated the moon rising in pale radiance over the lacy crest of a spruce tree, though daylight had still not entirely left the sky. A full moon tonight, he noted, big-breasted and

proud, brazen as a young trollope who knows she can name her price.

He glanced down when he felt a sting on the back of his hand and in the silvery light saw a mosquito feeding on his flesh. Interested to see how long it would tarry, he watched it for a while, then smashed it flat. "Greedy," he said, and wiped the mess on his trouser leg. "If you'd known when to stop you would still be alive to drink again, but you had to go too far."

Solitude. He reflected on that for a moment, thinking that most of the time he enjoyed it. The company of his fellow men irritated him, and that of women seemed destined to disappoint him in the end, though of course they were necessary, no denying that! Men with *real* power,

he had noticed, always went it alone, yes, even the bigwigs in the fur business; men like William McGillivray with the Nor'Westers and Simon McGillivray before him. Then there was John Jacob Astor.

He spat into the grass.

All these men were basically loners, strangely detached from other people, and they weren't afraid to live with themselves even when they knew they were bastards!

He watched a fleecy cloud drift lazily across the face of the moon and it reminded him of a visit he had once paid to a notorious whorehouse in Montreal, where a tart had done a certain dance for the edification of the customers. It had involved the use of squares of a gauzy material which she draped seductively around her naked form, scarfs she removed slowly one by one to the pulsing beat of the music. The customer who tossed the most money onto the stage had the privilege of removing the final veil and got to kiss the spot it had covered.

Thinking about that, his body went painfully rigid. Christ, he thought, what he would give to have that

slut here with him now! His mind and body swelled to bursting as he thought of all the things he would do to her; all the *special* things, tricks he had picked up during his time in the Orient. He had to give them their due, the yellowskins knew a thing or two about

His head snapped up and he listened intently.

So attuned was he to the cadence of the night that the slightest alteration in the pulse-beat sounded like thunder in his ears, and sound carried far in the backcountry. Far downhill and to the east, somewhere near the lake, a nightjar had been singing for most of the evening then abruptly it stopped. Almost at the same time he heard, distantly, a commotion in the woods, like the dull thud of a young tree toppling over. It indicated to him that some large animals, probably deer, had been disturbed at their repose and had dashed off frantically at great speed.

The woods were suddenly locked in silence, as the rustling and scurrying and even the endless chirring and humming of the insects had ceased. A watchfulness descended on the forest.

Indians? he wondered. There were some Cree and a few wandering Chippewa about. Two days ago he had met and traded with a small

party of Cree and had been invited to spend a night in their camp. It *could* be Indians, he supposed, except that the redskins usually moved through the woods like panthers, even when they were hunting, and the braves wouldn't hunt at night unless they were desperate. They would take pains not to disturb and chase away a potential source of food for another time.

It could be a war party. The Indians often left their own camps stealthily by night to surprise their enemies at dawn. He felt a start of alarm at the thought and automatically reached for his rifle. By no means all Indians were as friendly as the small group of Cree

he had recently done business with. The most militant and savage of the tribes in the Northeast were the Iroquois of the Ottawa, a people who regularly and enthusiastically waged war for war's sake, and committed the most fiendish atrocities on those they defeated. It was chiefly in battle that their young braves could prove themselves worthy of being called men, and they went at war with a vengeance. The territory of the Six Nations was a long way away now, but that brought him scant comfort. The Iroquois had a habit of ranging far and wide in their eagerness for combat, and he had no desire to encounter *that* particular tribe, nor any of its offshoots.

But there was another possibility. It could be the brigade! He had tracked them for more than five hundred miles, only to lose them in rough water. The Cree had brought him as far as the head of Superior and he'd made a deal with them to supply him with a new canoe, which they had promised to bring him in the morning. Today he had passed the time by hunting jackrabbits in the hills, and though he had wandered a distance from the lake, he estimated that it couldn't be much more than a mile away from where he was now. Two at the most.

Quickly he collected his gear and hefted his rifle, and with a wink at the moon he slunk away into the trees, vanishing in the shadows.

She was lost! Keira couldn't believe it. But after stumbling about in one direction, then another, she could no longer delude herself. Shivering, and beginning to get really nervous, she sank down on a pile of pine needles and tried to get her bearings. Above all, she told herself, she must try to stay calm.

Everything had gone well until she had blundered into a small herd of sleeping deer and what a fright *that* had given her! Jolting awake, they

had leaped to

their feet, huge black shadows in the forest, and milled about for a moment in wild confusion as Keira choked back screams of terror and flew away blindly in the opposite direction, banging into trees, tripping over deadfalls, racing deeper and deeper into the forest as she sought to put as much distance between herself and the "monsters" as she could. It was only when she finally fell exhausted under a spruce that her first panic subsided and she realized the exact nature of the animals she had disturbed. Not monsters at all. Just deer.

By then she had gone a long way from camp, but Keira wasn't unduly worried. Glancing around, squinting to see in the dark, she found herself in a little woodland valley, in a small clearing at the bottom of an open slope bathed in moonlight. She decided to climb the slope and take a good look around, certain that from the ridge she would be able to get a clear view of the lake.

When she reached the top of the ridge, all she saw was acre upon acre of towering pines stretching away in all directions, completely blocking her view of the terrain around her. There was no sign of the lake at all.

Keira thought of shouting for help but belatedly recalled Luc's warning about wild beasts. As if to reinforce that warning, a spine-chilling howl resounded through the trees as the moon rose higher in the sky, and somewhere behind her it was answered by a long, drawn-out chorus of wailing and yipping that made the hair stand up at the back of her neck. Wolves or coyotes, Keira couldn't be sure, and though she had been hearing the same nightly refrain for weeks, it was a lot different listening to it in the gloom of the forest than safe and sound by the campfire surrounded by a crew of brawny men.

She was afraid to scream for help lest she attract these voracious creatures, and instead hurried desper-

ately in what she hoped was the right direction, taking care to make as little noise as possible, not easy to do with a thick carpet of crunchy pine needles underfoot, straggling tree roots everywhere, and matted undergrowth that constantly tripped her up. The moon, at least, sent dappled light shining down through the tree branches, but that same light only served to emphasize the blackness of the places where the moon couldn't reach, and there were many of those in the forest.

The night was cold, but soon Keira's body was covered with a clammy sweat that attracted hordes of biting insects, creatures that proceeded to nip and sting every inch of her exposed flesh. Swiping at them, her fingers encountered a sticky moistureher own blood! Panting, sobbing a little, Keira stumbled on, her bare arms snagged and torn on the thorny vines that were everywhere over the forest floor, her limbs battered as she stumbled into trees or fell over them, and a great numbing fear clutched at her heart.

Dear God, why hadn't she listened to Luc and stayed in the camp? He knew this country far better than she did, and she should have paid heed to his warning, Keira thought miserably as she blundered along. Too late, she saw that she had become overconfident in the course of the journey. Except for the odd dunking in an icy river or lake, and a few bumps and scrapes, she had fared surprisingly welland that had made her too bold.

She had done it to tease Luc, to show her defiance and at the same time to challenge him; it always excited her to provoke Luc Duval. And, yes . . . the aim had been to force him to come after her . . . to lure him into a situation where, for once, they would be completely alone together. The thought of it had filled her with such a wild, thrilling anticipation that mundane considerations like her virtue, safety, the

right or wrong of it, had been swept out of her head.

"Jezebel!" she choked. "What has come over you, Keira MacKenzie? Dear God, if Ma and Pa could see you now!"

Unable to go a step father, Keira collapsed where she stood and buried her face in her arms. She deserved this! It was the Lord's way of showing her that the lustful thoughts and feelings inside her were very wrongas if she didn't already know! But she'd desperately needed a reminder. It was dreadful, shocking the way she felt about Luc Duval, her mind seething with thoughts that at one time would have made her blush, or hide her head with shame, and her body feverish with a terrible raging need that she ached for him to satisfy.

But Duval wasn't blameless!

Keira took her hands away from her wet face and looked up. Oh no, he was far from spotless! Who had started that fever burning inside her in the first place? Who had made free with her that night in her tent, the night they were attacked? Monsieur Luc Duval!

And she . . . she was the one who had to pay the price.

"What am I going to do?" Keira wailed, looking about frantically. "I don't want to die."

A dank chill crept through the forest and she began to shiver violently. Stupidly, she had darted away without taking her jacket and she could feel her arms shrivel in the cold; feel it seeping through her blouse to her skin below, then down into her bones. Hugging herself, Keira crawled into the undergrowth beneath the nearest tree, deciding that the best thing she could do was stay there until morning; then, once it was daylight, she could risk shouting for help. There was less of a chance of wolves or wild dogs attacking her then. François had told her that these beasts did most of their hunting at night.

It seemed to Keira a very sensible idea, and she settled down to wait, hoping she wouldn't freeze to death before morning. It was so numbingly cold at night, though very warm now during the day. And it was so quiet. So still. She had the impression of the forest holding its breath, the only sound the occasional whispering of the wind moving through the trees like ghostly fingers, causing the leaves of the aspen she was sheltering under to tremble erratically. Shadows flitted about with the changing position of the moon, assuming the shape of a bear, a dog, a human

Keira felt something then, the aura of a presence watching her from the darkness.

"Oh God!" she moaned, and stuffed her knuckles in her mouth and closed her eyes, afraid to look. But even with her eyes closed she could feel it, and knew she was no longer alone, and that it whatever it was was *not* human. She felt the fine hair of her body rise and quiver, and suddenly she was deathly afraid.

"She's not here!" Jasper Rawson shouted to the men working on the canoe by the lake shore. They were working in the light of an oil lantern now, anxious to finish the repairs so the vessel would be ready for morning. Otherwise it was quite dark, the moon, so bright just a short time ago, now covered by a fine haze.

Jasper had gone to Keira's tent with a balm that he used for warding off the insects, a concoction he made up from an Indian recipe given to him years before. He had promised at supper to bring it over once he had it ready only to find her tent unoccupied.

Luc sprang up immediately and seized the lantern. When a quick search of the vicinity showed that Keira wasn't in the area, Luc swore furiously, cursing the day he had decided to bring her with them. That

decision had brought the end of peace in his life, disrupted his plans, and plunged him into a state of perpetual inner agitation as he asked himself what he was going to do about the girl. He'd had his life all carefully mapped out, and everything had been going according to plan, when *she* had entered his life and changed everything.

Leaving a few men in camp, Luc split up the rest and the two groups set off in opposite directions, with the understanding that should one team find her they would send off two shots as a signal to the others. He didn't have to tell his men that it was imperative that they find Keira soon. They were as familiar with the hazards as he was, the least among them that she could freeze to death if compelled to spend the entire night in the woods.

Very quickly Luc's anger left him and frantic worry set in, his mind alive with thoughts of her stumbling into a muskeg and being sucked down by quicksand. Or falling into one of the pits the Indians used to trap larger game, each pit studded with sharp, pointed sticks. He had visions of her falling prey to wolves, or landing in the fatal embrace of a bear. And it was then, forced to face the possibility of her death, that Luc knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he *must* find her even if he had to search until he dropped himself, for without her brightness and beauty to light up his day, and the memory of her in his arms to warm his nights, his life would be dark and flat . . . and empty.

13

It seemed to Keira that she had sat frozen with fear for hours, her eyes screwed shut, an arm over her face in a hopeless attempt to protect herself from whatever it was that she felt close to her, when she heard quite clearly the snap of a twig behind her.

She opened her mouth to scream but nothing came out.

Then she saw it, the eyes glowing in the shadows.

Keira was on her feet in a flash, bolting headlong in the opposite direction, too terrified to care how much noise she was making. She hardly felt it when she banged into trees in her path, or when her legs

became entangled in roots and vines and thorns tore at her flesh as she raced along blindly. When she fell, as she did constantly, she picked herself up and kept going. She could *hear* someone following her now, crashing through the underbrush behind her.

The raccoon whose eyes she had seen watched her flee. It also watched the man chasing her, then went

back to foraging when he too vanished from sight. When the scream rang out, shattering the silence, it scurried hastily back into the thicket. There it waited, watching and listening.

Keira ran directly into them as they stood like statues in a clearing touched by the faint light of a hazy moon, five hideous apparitions in full war paint, part of a larger group who were planning a surprise attack on the Chippewa. Hearing the commotion in the woods, five of them had broken off to investigate. Now they stared at the girl with almost as much surprise as Keira was staring at them. They recovered from the shock first, and instantly surrounded her, laughing and gesturing and shouting excitedly about the unexpected booty they would carry back to their village.

The man who had been following Keira hastily vanished back into the woods. He was miserably disappointed at losing his quarry, but there was no question of a rescue attempt. The very idea was ludicrous. If it failed and he was captured, *he* would fare much worse than she would. She would undoubtedly be raped, each of the braves sampling her charms. And she might even be slapped around a bit and turned into a slave by the Indian women, who might or might not ill-use her. But there was a good chance that she wouldn't be killed, though he had experience of tribes who savagely used their female captives, raping and impaling them and burning them at the stake, or leaving them to die slowly in the wilderness with their kneecaps crushed, prey for the first wild animal that happened upon them. But, more often than not, female prisoners were taken into the tribe. Male prisoners were not so lucky.

He shuddered when he thought of their refined and lingering modes of torture: castration, flaying alive, being smeared with honey and staked down on top of

an anthill, or dangled upside down over a fire, to name a few and in the end, of course, scalped.

He shook his head, cursing his bad luck. Then he thought of Luc Duval and smiled. Would Duval try to spring her loose, he wondered. If so, then he was the world's worst fool.

Half-fainting and limp with terror, Keira was taken back to the Indian village some three miles farther down the lake. It was set back from the water on a high ridge protected by pine trees that obscured the view of anyone who happened to be passing on the lake. Afterwards, she could barely remember that hurried trip through the forest with one of the Indians dragging her by the arm, jerking her impatiently to her feet each time she stumbled or her shaking legs gave way beneath her. All the way to the village, through the woods and sometimes in the open, Keira tried not to look directly at her captors. To gaze at the weirdly painted faces and bodies, done up to look like birds of prey, was to strike fresh terror into her heart. They all had bows, arrows, and shields. The brawny, mostly naked savage striding ahead of her had a long knife and an axe thrust into his belt. His partner carried a spear. These five were young and vigorous, and all the way back to their camp they were silent, an excitement and urgency in their catlike movements, each of them turning now and then to stare into Keira's face.

After a long march they tugged her up a steep hill, through a stand of pines, and Keira saw and smelled the smoke of a fire, and there before them was the village. At its entrance on either side of the path were carved statues of a huge bird with a wicked hooked beak. This same bird, Keira saw, was represented throughout the camp, perched on top of tall poles all around the perimeter of the clearing and even painted on the dozens of tipis, conical shelters made out of

birch-bark, some also decorated with strange designs and symbols or pictures of horses, hunting scenes, and a creature she came to know later was a buffalo.

First to greet them was a pack of growling dogs of all shapes and sizes, most of them very lean. These were followed by a host of young children, the smaller ones naked in spite of the coolness of the night. The older children and the women approached more cautiously, but at the sight of Keira they halted abruptly, momentarily struck dumb. Then they all began to chatter at once, gesturing and exclaiming and in some cases shouting with excitement.

Keira came close to fainting as they all closed in around her in a tight circle, gaping into her face, touching her hair, her skin, her clothes. By

then she was in a sorry state of dishevelment, her long hair a tangled mess and stuck with leaves and twigs, her blouse ripped in several places and hanging by a thread over her left shoulder, her skirt spattered with mud and torn at the hem. The skin of her face, arms, and hands was covered with insect bites, bleeding scratches, scrapes and bruises. And her face was ashen with terror.

They asked her questions, shouting at her impatiently when Keira didn't understand. Some of the younger ones began to push and shove her from one side of the circle to the other, laughing, and, Keira felt, mocking her when she tried to push their hands away. Suddenly one of the women darted forward, quick as a snake, and ripped the blouse down off her shoulders exposing her left breast. When Keira desperately tried to cover herself, a laughing brave seized her from behind and pinned her flailing arms behind her back, then they all converged on her at once, touching, tugging, in the process pulling her hair and she was stripped to the skin.

Keira collapsed screaming on the ground. She

curled herself into a tight little ball and waited for the end to come, praying it would be quick. It was a moment or two before she realized that they had all fallen silent and had moved back from her, and that nobody was hurting her anymore. She raised her head to find that a tall man had entered the circle; a man in a fantastic headdress of feathers. In the light of the fire Keira saw that he was comparatively young, the upper half of his muscular body bare, the lower half in breeches of deerskin. Across his chest and shoulders was a massive tattoo of the same ugly bird Keira had seen elsewhere in the camp, and he wore earrings and countless necklaces around his throat and carried a long stick that ended in a kind of pipe.

Keira sensed immediately that he was someone of great importance.

He raised his hand, indicating that she should rise. But she couldn't; she was naked! A second later a buck ran into the circle and lifted her bodily to her feet, at the same time hissing something in her ear. Though Keira didn't understand the words, she got their meaning from the warning note in the brave's voice. She had better do what she was told, or else!

Mortified, she had no recourse but to stand there trying to cover herself as best she could while the man in the headdress walked slowly around her, assessing her worth as he might have done with a

horse. Then he strode right up to her and lifted her hair, rubbing it between his fingers. Next he pried her mouth open and examined her teeth in the light of the torch one of the young brave's held up for him. That done, he caught her wrists and drew her hands away from her body, his dark eyes crawling over every inch of her and missing nothing. Finally, with a hand at her buttocks to make sure that Keira didn't jerk away, he slipped his other hand between her legs, and, frozen, rigid, Keira felt one of his fingers enter her a little way.

Discovering her to be a virgin, he gave a satisfied nod. He spoke to her then, finally, but all Keira could do was whimper a choked response.

The chief stepped back and commenced barking out instructions, and instantly the villagers scurried away to do his bidding. Fortunately for Keira, there was a war-spell on the tribe, and while it lasted sexual intercourse was forbidden, though if all went as they had planned, it would be lifted the following night.

An older woman came to Keira and took her by the arm and led her to a tipi the tribe reserved for visitors. A young girl brought her fire in a jar, faintly illuminating the dark interior of the tipi. Keira was given something to drink, and, afraid to refuse, she took a sip, surprised to find that it was warm and pleasant and tasted rather like honey and nutmeg. Pointing to a pile of skins heaped in a corner, the women finally withdrew and Keira was alone at last.

Shuddering with cold and fear, Keira stumbled to the bed of skins and sat down, dragging the covers over her nakedness. By now she was weak with shock and exhaustion, her head swimming with terror and fatigue, but she didn't dream of trying to sleep. All her thoughts were concentrated on trying to escape. "Oh, Lord," she moaned, "show me a way out of this awful place. Please . . . I beg you . . ."

Slowly her eyes moved around the inside of the tipi. It was quite small, no more than eight feet across, and it contained no furniture as Keira knew it. The floor was the bare earth pounded flat and smooth, the middle section covered with a bearskin rug. There were strange and frightening wall hangings strung around; and ropes made of shells, beads, bones, and the skulls of small animals. A curious circle of stones had been laid out on the floor opposite the bed, done so carefully and in a kind of design that Keira knew they had special significance to the people. Dominat-

ing everything was a weaving of the same gruesome bird that she had

seen depicted everywhere in the village; that too, Keira sensed, had deep significance to them. Perhaps it was the emblem of their clan, she thought.

Dragging some of her covers with her, Keira tiptoed over to the slit that held the tipi closed and cautiously peeped out. Her heart sank at the sight of one of the young braves sitting squat-legged outside, a spear resting across his knees. There were dogs too, lots of them, and she felt certain that some of them might be vicious from the way they constantly snarled and prowled the clearing.

Keira threw herself back on the bed and bit back hopeless tears, asking herself how she could possibly escape from this well-guarded hillside encampment. What a senseless fool she had been to think of teasing Luc Duvaland what she would give now to be back snug and secure with her new clan!

What could she expect in the morning? Keira asked herself in dread. And that man in the headdress could he be their chief? what could she expect from him? As if she didn't know!

Tensely she lay listening to the sounds of the village, the murmur of voices, the crackling of the fire, dogs snapping and yipping, and from one of the other tipis, the fretful wailing of an infant.

So weird, chilling, and alien! It made her flesh shrivel and her heart go stone cold. Though, Keira supposed, what seemed strange to *her* obviously was quite normal to them. There were plenty of people, the English in particular, who thought the Highlanders were a heathenish bunch of savages just because they were different from they were, and what was different was viewed as a threat.

But for all that she had to get away!

Keira thought of Luc then and tears welled in her

eyes. At this very moment, she thought, he could be searching for her. And he *would* search, she felt that with absolute certainty, until he either found her or lost his life in the process. A terrible chill gripped her heart. What if Luc managed to track her to this village only to encounter a host of warlike warriors who were well armed and ready for combat, men who knew intimately the ways of the wilderness and could blend into it like ghosts, ready to pounce on any reckless stranger who was foolish enough to venture into their territory.

Because of her stupidity, Luc might lose his life! Keira made up her mind that somehow or other she would find a way to escape.

In the morning the women brought her a bowl of gruel to eat, maize sweetened with wild honey. They brought her water in which tiny pieces of bark and dried herbs floated, and when Keira hesitated, dubious, one of the women dipped her fingers in the bowl and rubbed the milky liquid over the stings on Keira's arms. Almost instantly Keira felt a cooling and lessening of the itch that had kept her awake for most of the night.

When they left, she checked to make sure the door of the tipi was closed, then quickly washed herself all over with the medicated water, using the edge of one of the skins to rub the mud and dirt off her face and limbs. Her whole body felt deliciously clean and soothed by the time she'd finished.

Today, Keira told herself firmly, she would find a way to slip away. She would watch and wait, and surely the right moment would come. What she *wouldn't* do was wait here like a spineless coward until Luc eventually tracked her down, standing a good chance of being killed in the process. Through a crack in the door she observed the camp going about its

business, the women bringing wood to build up the fire which had been kept smoldering all night, then stirring up the pots dangling above it and feeding their menfolk and children, much as women did everywhere. Then the men picked up their weapons and hurried away into the forest, as if going out to hunt, though the most vigorous of the tribe, the young braves who still had to prove their manhood, were already away at war. The older men had the task of hunting for game to provide the meat for the feast later when, hopefully, the warriors would return triumphant. Unless it was a full-scale battle of real importance, the chief did not go with them. Instead, he spent most of the day conferring with his elders over weightier matters than petty warfare against an enemy tribe they considered inferior to their own.

A squaw brought Keira a short leather garment to wear, a kind of beaded dress that barely reached to her knees, but she took it eagerly and put it on, thinking that she could hardly make her escape while naked, prey to the hordes of insects that were everywhere about. The thought of them biting her more intimate areas made her shudder.

Then she was led out into the clearing and pushed down by the fire.

There the young squaw who had attended her the night before set about combing the tangles out of her waist-long hair with a comb fashioned out of a piece of elk horn. It seemed to Keira that every eye in the camp was on her as she sat curled up in her shockingly scanty gown, tucking her long slender legs beneath her out of sight. Her hairdresser worked on her long tresses until they glistened bright gold in the morning sunlight. Over the long weeks in the open Keira's hair had lightened considerably and was now heavily streaked with blonde.

Even the braves came to exclaim and admire her hair, and the chief himself came to inspect it. In the

broad light of day he seemed younger to Keira, tall and athletic, with prominent cheekbones and dark, almond-shaped eyesthough she was careful not to meet those eyes, every nerve in her body quaking.

He watched for heart-stopping minutes, then said something to the girl who was grooming her. Perhaps, Keira surmised, he was issuing more instructions, as the girl jumped to her feet at once and ran to a nearby tipi and returned with colorful necklaces and hair ornaments. These she carefully draped around Keira's neck and arranged in her hair. The chief had a haughty, aloof demeanor as befitted his status, but he watched them for a moment, while Keira studiously avoided his eyes. Then he gave a satisfied nod and strode away, followed by most of the men in the camp. But he'll return! thought Keira, quaking inwardly. Sooner or later he'll be back, and he wants me to be ready . . .

While the long day unfolded, Keira closely observed the movements in the camp and tried to think of a way to escape. She could see that most of the vigorous men were absent, but the chief had left enough behind to guard the place, and these braves, she noticed, were well armed and constantly alert. They were well assisted by the restless pack of dogs, who set up a deafening racket whenever anything as much as stirred in the surrounding woods, or when a visitor from a friendly tribe appeared in the clearing. One such arrived in the early afternoon bringing gifts of wild turkey and sweet potatoes. With some pride, the guards presented him to Keira, and she almost smiled at the look of pure astonishment on his face. All the way back out of camp he kept glancing at her over his shoulder while shaking his head, and she was left with the impression that he didn't approve, or even that he felt sorry for her.

Thinking that she might notice something that she

could use to her advantage, Keira paid close attention to the routine of the tribal camp life: the mothers with their children, the sentinels vigilantly keeping watch. She noticed that the women were tender and indulgent with the very small children but quite strict and demanding with those over the age of about five or six, making them work almost as hard as the adults, and punishing them with hard cuffs and slaps when they disobeyed. The women labored continuously, sweeping out their tipis, working in the field that had been cleared for crops and vegetables, gathering roots and tubers and wild fruits and vegetables in the meadows and woods. She watched a woman making a basket and well made and beautiful it was too and another sewing beads and shells onto a leather garment with a needle made of bone. An old grandmother huffed and puffed as she pounded acorns into meal, and a swarthy matron pulverized wild strawberries into a kind of sauce. Catching sight of Keira watching her, she brought her some to taste, smiling when Keira nodded that it was delicious.

Every so often a squabble would break out among the housewives, with much shouting and arm-waving, and fights frequently erupted between the children, fierce fights in which they would kick and scratch and pound each other until the loser howled and ran away. The women never interfered and left them to get on with it, which Keira found quite shocking; she couldn't know that the parents approved of the young learning to stand up for themselves, even if they had to take some strong punishment in the course of their lessons, and that battling between themselves prepared them for the warfare they would indulge in as men. In fact, before a youth could claim to be a man he had to distinguish himself in warfare; otherwise he was ridiculed and scorned by the rest of the tribe and accorded status lower than a woman, the beast of

burden for the clan.

They could be light-hearted too, Keira noticed, and many of them sang while they worked. Sometimes they broke off their toil to indulge in a little horseplay, pushing and slapping each other, pinching and tugging hair and laughing, darting away. This rough mischief led Keira to wonder if they had really meant to be cruel to her when the braves first brought her into the camp, or if it was only their way of having fun, boisterous and unrestrained as their play seemed to be.

That day the women were quite kind to her and she was given plenty of food to eat, most of it surprisingly tasty. They came to her with examples of the fine pottery they made, and colorful weaving, and brought soothing ointment for her to rub on her many insect bites when they noticed Keira scratching again. Strange as their culture was to her and Keira could see that their lives were hard basically these women were much like females everywhere, tending the children, hearth and home, while their men went about *their* business in the world beyond the encampment.

A little of her apprehension began to ebb as some of the strangeness wore off. Perhaps, Keira told herself, she was imagining that the chief had a carnal interest in her. And perhaps the people weren't quite as savage and primitive as she'd first thought. They seemed to have instincts akin to civilized people, even if they were far less inhibited. She began to hope that somehow or other she might be able to persuade them to let her go so that she could return to her own clan, a desire she thought they would understand providing she could somehow get it across to them.

Late that afternoon the chief and his personal retinue returned, and shortly afterwards the war party that had gone out the night before roared into the clearing flourishing their weapons. By their shouts

and laughter, Keira surmised that they had been successful against whatever enemy they had fought.

Then she saw the captives.

Men, women, and even children from some other tribe were dragged in and fastened securely to trees ringing the site. Once that had been done, the feasting and drinking began. The triumphant warriors were feted and praised and fed the choicest parts of the game caught that day, and given copious amounts of strong mead to drink. The braves swaggered and strutted, and though Keira couldn't understand what they said, she could tell from their manner that they were boasting about their exploits, their voices loud and aggressive and their eyes glittering with excitement. The more they drank, the wilder and more excited they became.

At twilight huge logs were tossed on the fire, sending crackling sparks hissing up into the atmosphere. By then most of the camp were roaring drunk and the shouting and laughter was ear-splitting, a demonic frenzy communicating itself to everyone present, even the

women and children, as if the best was yet to come. Keira, temporarily ignored, huddled near the fire and tried to make herself as inconspicuous as possible as a dread feeling of foreboding rushed over her once more. There was a savage aura in the air. She could almost taste it. Desperately she glanced about, thinking that this might be a good time to try to slip away, but she saw that fresh guards had been posted around the encampment, stationed there to ensure that none of their enemies chose that time to attack, taking advantage of the fact that many of the braves were uproariously drunk by then.

The "entertainment" began.

At a signal from the chief, the captives were brought forward, the women of the tribe battering them with heavy wooden paddles and clubs as they were dragged

across the clearing, the warriors shattering the night air with the most fiendish shrieks and yells, and in seconds the campsite was turned into a living hell.

The child captives were roughly separated from the adults and hurled into tipis, the women seized by their hair, thrown to the ground, and raped, The male prisoners, in a frenzy of blood-lust that had Keira vomiting and screaming, were stabbed, burned, gouged, and finally scalped, though some the strong ones were subjected to more refined forms of torture calculated to keep them alive for days.

Somehow Keira managed to crawl to her tent, where she collapsed on her bed in shock, waves of nausea and horror breaking over her, and any hope she had of being able to appeal to these savages blasted away.

14

Luc's interpreter eyed the Cree who stood before them cynically, and translated, "He say he have valuable information for you, but first he want many gun and firewater."

"Agreed," Luc nodded at once.

For the entire day and the previous night Luc and his men had combed the lonely hills, woods, and lake shore with mounting fear and desperation. They had parleyed with the chiefs and shamans of several Indian villages and parted with much of their trade goods in

exchange for "valuable information" none of which had brought them any closer to finding Keira.

But the Indian who stood gazing at them hopefully had sought *them* out. In the process he had come close to getting himself shot when Luc and his crew realized that someone was stalking them. Now, as they confronted each other on the banks of the lake, a full twenty-four hours after Keira had vanished, Luc was

in no mood to quibble or waste time.

When the price of the information was agreed on, the Cree pointed up into the hills and commenced talking and gesturing rapidly, frowning and shaking his head all the while. When he finished, Takona duly translated.

"He say he visit Buzzard People today and see white woman in they village; young white woman with gold hair"

"Mon Dieu!" Luc interrupted. "It's *got* to be Keira! There are no white women that we know of in the territory at all, and to describe the color of her hair"

Luc grabbed his gun and would have left immediately if Takona hadn't seized his arm, crying, "Wait! You not hear all." When Luc glanced at him impatiently, the interpreter continued darkly, "He also say Buzzard People very fierce; very bad orenda, and they not parley with stranger. He say they braves eat the holly leaf and make war on Chippewa village. Can not go there now." Takona tapped his head, adding, "Bad spirit he in there making braves crazy."

"All the more reason to get Keira out at once," Luc snapped. "Ask him how many braves are in the village."

This extra information cost Luc another pistol, two more knives, and a further keg of rum, but it was imperative to have it. Frantic as he was to reach Keira, he knew that it could be suicidal to barge in to such a village unprepared, particularly if that village was in the process of waging war and had eaten the holly leaf that "made them crazy."

Their informer imparted the sobering news that there were more than two hundred braves in the village. The white woman, he said, had not been chained up when he saw her or confined to a cage, as the tribe sometimes did with captive women. Then he

said something that made Luc's heart pound when it was quickly translated to him: She was being prepared to become one of the chief's women, an event that would probably take place that evening once the war-spell was lifted from the village.

The Cree went off happily with his booty, and, impatient though Luc was, he and his men had to take the time to make careful plans. Obviously, they would be vastly outnumbered against the Buzzard People, and it would be insanity to simply blunder into their camp and take their chances. As they knew, many Indian tribes killed their captives in the event of an attack, and they couldn't risk that with Keira. Nor was there any way of stealing up on them and catching them unawares. Sentries were always posted near the camp, and every Indian village was replete with noisy dogs, many of them vicious enough to tear a man to pieces.

"But they have one weakness that we can use against them," said Luc. "Superstition. And all the better if they've been chewing the leaf."

They raced back to their camp for some of the white man's "medicine," in this case gunpowder. "And smear some of those meat scraps with laudanum for the dogs," Luc called to François.

Keira's tipi was filled with a glow from the roaring fire outside. A fearful noise resounded throughout the clearing. Peeping out through the doorflap, Keira saw that they were dancing now, wildly, uninhibitedly, many of the men and women quite naked, sweat glistening like oil on their tawny skin. The pounding of drums and the shrilling of a pipe or flute added to the pandemonium of shrieking, howling, and mad laughter, and the steady barking of the dogs.

Keira dropped the flap and sat back on her heels, an icy determination gripping her now. If she stayed here

waiting like a sacrificial lamb she was doomed. At any moment one of them could turn on her in their insane frenzy, or the chief himself could come for her, and if that happened she'd rather die than submit to him. She decided to take her chances and try to slip away, now while they were all stumbling about in a drunken stupor, some lying sprawled dead drunk on the ground. The dogs, however, weren't drunk, but even they had been affected to some extent by the night's festivities, gorging themselves on the leftover food. Surely, Keira reasoned, their hunger at least had been slaked, and with such full stomachs they might be less inclined to chase her. As for the

sentries. . . . well, she would try to watch their movements and hope for the best.

It took her ten excruciatingly long minutes to tear out the pegs holding down the back of the tipi. Shrouding herself in several of the dark skins covering the bed, Keira crawled under the bottom of the tent and looked swiftly around. Everybody seemed to be congregated at the fire, and there was no sign of any guards in the immediate vicinity, so Keira darted across an open space dotted with tipis and plunged into the underbrush surrounding the clearing. Panting and sweating with terror, the memory of the things they had done to their captives lending wings to her heels, she dashed headlong down a long slope, springing to her feet every time she fell, totally immune to the thorny thickets raking at her flesh and the trailing roots snagging at her ankles, immune to everything but the need to get away.

A hazy moon sent some light filtering down through the trees and again the night was cool. There was a great hush in the woods compared to the bedlam going on behind her in the camp. Soon a hundred feet and then two hundred separated Keira from her captors, and with every foot she put between them her

heart began to fill with hope. Down and down she went in the direction of the lake, gulping in great rasping breaths of the chilly night air, her throat beginning to sting and her lungs to burn as if they were on fire.

"God, don't let them catch me!" she gasped. "Don't let . . . them"

Then Keira heard the dogs behind her.

"Dogs!" Maurice whispered unnecessarily since they could all hear them, snarling and howling and racing straight for them.

"Light half the fuses!" Luc said, and the men touched the short lengths of rope dangling from half the canisters of gunpowder to the flame of the covered lanterns ten of them carried, lanterns they had kept shuttered all the way up the hill.

"The moment they appear, let the powder sail," Luc told them, "then run like hell out of the way. Let's hope they think the Inini-Wudjoo is paying them a visit. In all the smoke and confusion, try to sneak into the village. Then you know what to do," he went on grimly, his pistol in his hand. "Tear down the entire village if you have to, but one way or another, we don't leave that camp until we find Keira."

Stationing themselves behind trees, they waited tensely for the dogs and their Indian owners to appear, each man silent with his own thoughts, chief among them what they could expect if their plans misfired. No one had to spell it out for them, not for these veterans of countless trips into the wilderness. From the more primitive tribes who shunned contact with the white man, they could expect a long and agonizing death that would drive them mad long before they finally expired. They would taste cruelty at its most diabolical. What they could *not* expect was the slightest degree of mercy from a people who didn't

expect it from others, who lived by simple rules of good and bad, black and white, and who were incapable of understanding the concept of showing clemency to an enemy who, if allowed to live, might later strike back.

Yet none of Luc's crew even considered running away. The handful Luc had left to keep watch over his campsite had all expressed the desire to go with him and were insulted at being left behind. To a man they adored Keira. Now they were quite prepared to prove it.

Furious barking reverberated through the surrounding hills.

"Here come," Luc whispered. "Let the powder go!"

Just as the men swung back to hurl their missiles, a wraithlike figure burst from the trees and they saw her long, flowing hair glinting pale in the moonlight. There was an instant when all of them froze, when they wondered if they were dreaming or seeing a spirit themselves, then Luc sprang forward and swept Keira up into his arms, and the first of the dogs were upon them, the Indians right behind.

Later, when Keira tried to recall the details of that hideous night to relate to others, she found that she could only remember it in bits and pieces: slipping away from the village, running down the hill, then the vaulting surge of horror she felt when she heard the barking of the dogs behind her, and the bone-melting relief when Luc rushed forward and scooped her up in his arms.

After that it was mayhem. The snarling dogs, the Indians shrieking as they-chopped and slashed with their tomahawks, then the shattering roar and flash of light when the gunpowder went off at which point Keira fainted.

From Luc she learned about their desperate flight

through the woods back to their camp, and the frantic flurry of activity as they threw their goods into the canoes and pushed off into the lake, leaving most of their supplies behind. Once afloat, the voyageurs paddled furiously, anxious to put as much distance between themselves and the Buzzard People as they could before the Indians discovered that it had been humans, and not the Inini-Wudjoo, who had paid them a visit that night.

Keira did remember waking up in the canoe safe and sound in Luc's arms, and she would always remember the expression on his face when he learned that she hadn't been hurt, and her own profound relief when she found herself surrounded by her own clan once more, held tight in the arms of its leader.

But it was hours before the shock of her experience wore off and she could bear to speak about her encounter with the Buzzard People, something Keira was to remember vividly to her dying day. The fact that they were all alive seemed a miracle to her as they sailed away down the lake in the moonlight, the dark hill where she had been held captive gradually fading until it disappeared, like a nightmare upon waking.

15

Luc and his crew kept going until well after noon, when they felt it safe to pull into shore to attend to the many casualties they had not dared worry about before. Three of the men had been bitten by the dogs. Two had suffered cruel wounds from the tomahawks wielded by the Indians, and another had been slightly injured in the gunpowder blast. There were cuts and gouges and bruising, and Maurice had a broken toe.

While Dr. Cabot set the toe, Keira and Luc cleaned and dressed the wounds. Keira felt deeply ashamed when she thought of all the pain the men had endured for her sake, and shuddered to think of the risk they had taken. Not one of them blamed her and somehow that made it worse. She promised herself then that somehow she would make it up to them, and that she would never disobey orders again.

They didn't tarry on shore long, for the Buzzard People too had canoes. As soon as they had dressed the wounds and eaten a quick, cold meal, they pushed

on again down the north shore of the gigantic lake, which at least was calm for once.

They were all unusually subdued that day, the dark aura of the previous night very hard to shake off. A kind of somber aftershock kept most of them withdrawn and silent, including Luc. Now that Keira was back with them safe and reasonably sound, he couldn't help thinking of all the things that might have happened, and it chilled his blood. Though he knew that few of the tribes in that area were as barbaric as the Buzzard People, there were some every bit as fiendish. Such tribes tended to be the more primitive, and they lived by a different code, a code that the whites found difficult to fully comprehend, which often landed them in trouble with the Indians. And the trouble was by no means one-sided. As Luc had witnessed himself, the white man regularly perpetrated atrocities of his own on the Indians, which hardly contributed to winning the Indians' trust and confidence.

Luc had to confront a grim question then. What would become of Keira if anything were to happen to *him*? Accidents happened all too often in the wilderness. The constant threat of sudden death hovered over every brigade that ventured into the West. And there was something else: with a trade war seething between the North West Fur Company and the men from Hudson Bay with independents like himself wedged in between the threat of violence lurked everywhere in the hinterland. There was no law in the Northwest. Rules and regulations made in faraway London were ignored here, and it was every man for himself. At the meeting in Lachine the grim facts had been aired, and the men who were about to depart for the upcountry were well warned. A war raged in the fur territory, one that each side was determined to win regardless of what they had to do to achieve

victory. Vast land masses were at stake, and enormous amounts of money, power, prestige, and political supremacy on a gigantic scale awaited the victor. God help the small independents with the audacity to blunder into the middle of this fray. As Malcolm McTavish had told Luc bluntly at the meeting in Lachine, "You stand a good chance of being crushed or, God forbid, even killed. This is a struggle to the death, and the small firms will be the first to go. You ought to come in with us, Duval, while there's still a chance."

Now, as they sailed along the shore of Lake Superior, moving ever deeper into the fur country and closer to the war zone, all Luc's thoughts were for Keira, and belatedly he castigated himself for

bringing her here. He was not afraid for himself and fully understood and accepted the risks, but the girl . . .

He made up his mind to have a serious talk with Keira when they camped that night. The next day, if all went well, they would arrive at the great North West trading depot of Fort William.

"Is it safe to be out here?" Keira asked Luc nervously as they climbed a wooded ridge above the lake and sat down on the crest to watch the sunset over the water. All the way from camp she had been anxious, constantly throwing uneasy glances over her shoulder, thinking that if Luc wanted to discuss something with her he could have done so in the privacy of her tent when only a few days ago she had gone to great lengths to get him to follow her into the woods! But that was before the Buzzard People had taught her a grim lesson about what happened to girls who were headstrong and disobedient.

Luc smiled and put a hand over hers. "It's quite safe. The tribes hereabouts are used to whites, and

most of them do business with Fort William, so they are eager to keep on friendly terms since it's to their advantage."

Keira nodded, conscious of his warm hand covering hers, a broad, very masculine hand, she noticed, the skin many times darker than hers. "I'm sorry about all the trouble I've caused," she said, feeling a strong need to apologize. Glancing at him from the corner of her eyes, Keira decided to test him. "I'm sure you must be very sorry now that you brought me along?"

Luc was silent a moment while Keira held her breath, then to her dismay he nodded. "In some ways I'm *very* sorry," he admitted. "I hold myself responsible for what happened to you last night. And there are other things too that I should make clear to you; other hazards besides the Indians, in some ways *worse* than the Indians." He turned and looked into her eyes, and the moment he did, Keira felt as if he'd touched her. She had an intense desire to lean forward and kiss him at that second and stopped herself just in time.

"I want you to listen very closely to what I'm going to explain to you," Luc said, "and if there's anything you don't understand, please ask. It's important that I make you fully aware of some of the problems we might encounter the farther west we go. I want no repeats of what happened two nights ago," he went on grimly, "not in any form. You might not be as lucky next time."

He cared about her! Keira could tell from his tone of voice, the things he said, even from the expression in his eyes, that Luc *did* care for her very much, and that was more important to Keira than anything else in the world. She felt like rejoicing. It was all she could do to stop herself from throwing her arms around his neck; from crawling onto his lap and showering him

with kisses. It wasn't a sober talk she wanted, but the feel of his strong arms about her and his mouth on hers.

"Why are you smiling?" There was a sharpness in his voice.

"Oh . . . I . . . nothing."

"Pay attention!" Luc gave her hand a little slap, a slap that was more like a caress. Keira, bubbling happily inside, arranged her face into a suitably grave expression and tried to concentrate on the things he was telling her . . . but it was no use. All she could think of was *them*, and when Luc would finally reveal what was in his heart, and if he would ask her to marry him. Her mind could concentrate on nothing else. All the while he was speaking to her, Keira studied his features, admiring his beautiful dark eyes with their flecks of gold, his clean, shining black hair, strong white teeth that were so startling against his tanned skin. And his

"Do you have any questions?"

Keira gave a guilty start and tried to think of something.

"Have you been listening to me?"

"Oh, ah . . . yes, certainly." But her blush gave her away. "I heard every word you said"

"Then repeat it."

"What?" She blinked, her blush deepening. "Surely you don't expect me to repeat it word for word?" Keira blustered, beginning to get a little annoyed at his imperious manner and the way he was glowering at her from under his brows.

"Well?" Luc had no intention of making it easier on her. He had impressed on her how important it was just as he had warned her never to leave the campsite in the evening! Had he been firmer before, he thought, they might have avoided that nightmarish situation.

"It was something about the North West Company being at war," Keira finally tossed off, not looking at him, and at the same time sorry that she had allowed her mind to wander. It was just that she loved him so much! She could hardly think of anything else. And with Luc sitting so close to her, his hand over hers, and the yearning so strong inside her . . .

His hand tightened painfully, almost crushing her fingers.

"Look at me!" he told her angrily, and when she did, "You are the most stubborn, defiant woman I've ever met and the most stupid! Must I *beat* sense into you? I will," he added quickly, his eyes blazing, "if you disobey me one more time, so be warned."

"I said I was sorry." Keira tried to tug her hand away from his, her fingers numb now. She was hurt and angry at the things he called her, especially stupid. "I want to go back to camp," she said.

"You want," Luc mocked. "My God, you sound like a child!" His eyes narrowed dangerously. "What you want doesn't matter. You will stay here until *I* say you can go, and that won't be before you listen to what I have to say, yes, even if you have to stay here all night!"

Keira, her face tight, gazed straight out at the lake where the rising moon cast a silvery shadow on the water and ribbons of rose still lingered in the evening sky. Such a beautiful scene and they had to be fighting!

"By your reckless disobedience you might have killed us all," Luc told her aloof profile. "As it is, you caused many of my men to be injured and half my trade goods to be lost"

"I didn't ask to be brought here!" Keira wheeled to face him, and in the fading light Luc saw the strain on her face and the tears spattering down her cheeks, her soft mouth quivering, and his anger evaporated like a

puff of smoke, Instantly his hard fingers relaxed on her hand, and when Keira jumped to her feet, so did he. When she turned to go, there was a split second when he hid to make a decision, when all his carefully made plans rose mockingly before his eyes, when he knew, with a deep certainty, that the next move he made could alter the course of the rest of his life and not necessarily for the better.

Luc put a hand on her shoulder, detaining her.

Keira gave a little start; she seemed surprised, then she turned slowly and raised her face to his, and he would always remember the way she looked then, her eyes wide and sparkling with tears, the moonlight on her upturned face, her mouth so sweet and vulnerable and uncertain that Luc was deeply touched.

Tenderly he cupped her face between his hands and kissed her, and though the touch of her inflamed him his kiss was gentle, his manner unhurried. He drew her to him and held her close and for a moment they stood like that, her head against his chest, his fingers lightly stroking her hair, his cheek resting against the top of her head. Luc felt the erratic beating of Keira's heart, the way she trembled, her breathing so shallow and fast, and he realized with a pang that for Keira too this was a turning point from which she would never be able to go back, and that for her the risks would be even greater. She was innocent, Luc knew that now; there was a fresh purity about her that aroused in him the urge to protect and cherish her.

With that thought, and her willingness to trust him and give herself to him completely, there surged in Luc such a force of emotion that for a moment his head reeled and he couldn't think at all but an instant later his mind was suddenly crystal clear, and his ever-acute sense of self-preservation, his love of freedom, rose clamoring for his attention. Did he want this type of responsibility at this particular point

in his life, and for a woman he hardly knew? It was *still* not too late to step back, to continue following the familiar route he had mapped out for himself, a route he knew, in a detached part of his mind, that was right for him.

Then Keira raised her head and their eyes met and Luc's senses jumped and spun, and it was *already* too late. But strangely, he felt no regret. Instead, he felt a powerful burst of elation, as if he had just stumbled blindly through a dark tunnel into brilliant sunshine on the other side.

Smiling, suddenly idiotically happy, Luc put his arm around Keira and turned her to face the moon sailing overhead, partially hidden behind a gauzy cloud bank.

Pointing to it, he said, "To the Indians she is the Night Goddess. And sometimes, like now, she discreetly pulls a veil over her face to give earth lovers the gift of privacy."

Keira looked at the moon, then at him, and by some magic alchemy they were drawn together, then down to the thick bed of aromatic pine needles at their feet, and their lips met joyously, triumphantly, for each in their own way had fought a battle to reach this moment and now they would savor it to the full.

When they were naked they looked at each other, their eyes luminous with the wonder all lovers feel at the moment of surrender, when the world is contained in the space immediately surrounding the object of their love and desire, and the only words spoken are endearments.

"How sweet and beautiful you are," Luc told her huskily, his warm hand caressing her body lightly from her shoulders to the slender curve of her hips as Keira lay turned towards him. "Your skin is like warm fresh milk. I want to put my lips to it, to taste it, to feel its sweetness under my tongue." He smiled at her, for

he could sense her nervousness, and went on in the same low, mesmerizing way, "Your breasts are twin hills covered with snow, but tipped with fire, and your eyes soft as smoke."

Keira *did* smile then and he saw her relax a little. "Do you love me?"

Luc only hesitated a fraction of a second. "Would a man *not* love a fragrant garden filled with succulent fruit, or turn away from a vision of perfection, or refuse a cup of nectar from the gods?"

Keira laughed softly. "How many women have you flattered like this?"

"None," Luc replied at once, and now his face was grave. He bent forward swiftly and brushed his lips teasingly across hers, then lifted her hand and put it on his chest. Shyly, her cheeks warm, Keira caressed his naked body, her breath catching at the beauty of hard muscles gilded over with bronzed, satiny skin. Smiling at Luc while he gazed at her intently, her fingers traced the arch of his nose, the firm line of his jaw, then lightly across his wide shoulders and blushing down to curl among the crisp black hair on his chest.

"You are . . . are very comely," she told him, desperate to express how she felt about him but at that eventful moment unable to find the right words. "Your eyes are like dark fire. It burns when you look at me," she whispered, admitting, "and your voice makes me weak."

Luc took her hand from his chest and placed it on his thigh.

Keira could feel his tension then in taut muscles; she sensed the restraint Luc was exerting over himself for her sake, his attempt to put her at her ease though she could plainly feel and *see* that he was ready to sweep her through a door she had never entered, into a land of mystery and warm, dark secrets, and

she, teetering on the brink of that mysterious place, was suddenly afraid.

"Are you frightened, my beloved?" Luc asked her softly, sensing it.

"No," Keira lied, her voice tiny, breathless.

He kissed her then with more passion and drew her close, his swelling need against Keira's body feeding the hunger she felt leaping up within herself, and he tasted her then, as he'd yearned to do, his tongue teasing her mouth, the lobes of her ears, her lips and throat, sending a delicious thrill coursing through her. She felt a prickly heat shudder over the surface of her skin as Luc bent his head to her breasts and kissed the nipples, turgid and ripe now and sweet to his tongue, blooming hot and ruddy as his mouth bathed them in moist warmth, the tugging sensation drawing a cry of pleasure from her lips.

Slowly, leisurely, Luc's hand wandered over her body, cupping her breasts, her hips, his fingers stroking her stomach, her ribcage, meandering down to her thigh, so slowly, persuasively, each caress heightening Keira's desire. Her breathing was rapid, her pulse racing. Hunger mounted and inhibitions melted away. She kissed him feverishly, her senses ablaze with anticipation, and her trembling hands roved his back, the tense muscles of his shoulders, the tightness of his hips.

Luc's fingers were suddenly between her thighs. Keira went rigid, her breath strangling, heart pounding as she felt him gently parting her yes! she screamed inwardly, oh yes! then the touch, like a flame to tinder, and as he began to fondle and tease, to tug and stroke, she felt the rapture begin deep in the core of her, then fan out in shivering waves across every inch of her flesh, and she was on fire, clutching at him, moaning incoherently, and finally she took him in her hand, sobbing, "Oh God, I love you so! I *do*

want you. II . . . please, my love, *please!*"

Then he was above her, clutched between her quivering thighs, Luc

bent swiftly and crushed her mouth in a devouring kiss, but the time for lingering kisses was past. He said something to her in French, his voice thick, then, as Keira arched to meet him, his descending body blotted out the moon and she felt a sharp pain as he slid inside her.

Sweat burst out across Luc's flesh as he lifted her by the buttocks and began to move, forcing himself to be gentle as he rocked her back and forth, his eyes on her face, the firm, uptilted breasts, the seductive beauty of her swelling his need so that he began to fear he would lose control and hurt her. But after the first moment or two of surprise and slight pain, Keira felt the rapture return, and with it the need, and rising with the burning tide she thrust herself against him, again and again, and suddenly, in a shuddering wave of fire, ecstasy such as she had never imagined overwhelmed her.

Keira cried a little in his arms afterwards, a release of tension rather than a sign of regret. "I didn't know . . . didn't dream . . . Oh, Luc," she said, raising her face to his. "You *do* love me, don't you?"

He smiled at her tenderly and smoothed the sweat-soaked hair back from her face. "Yes," he nodded, "I do love you."

Then Keira asked a question that made him laugh, not the one he had expected her to ask at that moment, and later Luc wondered if his laughter had been an expression of relief rather than amusement.

"Do you *really* think I'm stupid?" Keira whispered.

His brows rose and he grinned, his dark eyes twinkling mischievously. "God, no! Certainly not! If you have the wits to love me then you can't be stupid."

Laughing, Keira buried her head in his chest, but

after a minute she sobered, confessing, "At the time I left Scotland I was sure I would never be happy again, yet now and it seems like magic I'm happier than I have ever been before in my life. I have you, my dear one" she raised her face and smiled into his eyes "and I have a wonderful new clan and a life that I wouldn't change now for anything in the world."

Luc smiled and kissed her tenderly. He drew her down against his chest, then above her head his own smile faded as he was reminded of old promises he had made and old commitments he was honor-bound to keep even legally bound to keep! He had known this would change

everything, yet hadn't been able to stop himself. He loved Keira MacKenzie with all his heart and wanted her with him always. But

Luc thought of the fur barons then, men very like himself who were often compelled to spend much of their lives in the wilderness while their wives remained at home in Montreal. Life in the wilds could be harsh and lonely without a woman to share it with, and, as he had seen, Keira thrived on it. Out of expediency many of the partners and traders of the fur companies had set up a system whereby they maintained a "country" household in the backwoods and a city home in Montreal, and as long as the twain never met . . .

Dear God, no! The idea appalled Luc. But it was one solution to his dilemma. No, it was the *only* solution, he thought guiltily. He knew now that he could never let Keira go, any more than he could break his pledge to Clarise Menard, the woman who had waited for him for so long. Both deserved so much more but it was the best he could offer them!

Luc made up his mind to speak frankly to Keira when the right moment presented itself, but he wasn't looking forward to that particular conversation.

16

Fort William, the North West Company's main depot in the West, was a great surprise to Keira, as it was to everyone who saw it for the first time. It was like a small city in the heart of a jungle of forests, lakes, and rivers, with more than forty sturdy buildings on the banks of the Kaministiquia River, overlooked by brooding McKay Mountain.

The complex was laid out in a neat square comprising many acres, all enclosed by a spiked fence eighteen feet high. In the center was what Keira took to be a grand mansion with a graceful portico running the full length of the building. Inside this house there was a massive Great Hall, sumptuously appointed with the finest mahogany and walnut furniture, Turkey rugs, sparkling silver and crystal, paintings and pottery, some of it made by the Indians in the area. Pointing to a huge table with a surface like dark glass, Luc chuckled, "Wait till you see the banquets that take place there! They would put Paris and London to

shame. And the balls!" He smiled down at her, his eyes caressing her face and hair. "Perhaps we can find you a pretty gown in one of the

shops here. You'll find these shops very well stocked."

Keira was puzzled. "But, Luc, how can they hold balls? The only women I've noticed are Indians."

He turned away as if to examine one of the paintings. "Actually, there are two white women at Fort William, the wife of the master chef and the surgeon's lady."

Keira laughed' and walked up behind him and slipped her arms around his waist, hugging him. "Darling, two women can hardly dance with all of these men! You told me yourself that there can be close to two thousand men here in the summer season."

"Oh, well . . . the Indian women are usually invited too," Luc told her carefully. "The squaws are quite civilized hereabouts, through contact with the fort."

"Really?"

"Yes, really." He sighed and decided he might as well tell her the truth, or as much of the truth as was wise at that point, thinking that Keira would find out soon enough. Turning, he said casually, "As a matter of fact, some of the men are married to Indian women."

Her eyes widened in surprise.

"It's not so unusual when you think of it." He watched her closely. "Wherever Europeans have gone, they've married native women. The men here spend most of their lives in the wilderness, and"he leaned forward and gave her a quick kiss"they want to make life as normal as possible."

"I . . . see . . ."

"Come on, let's tour the rest of the complex," he said, changing the subject and forestalling any awkward questions she might have. "This room," he went

on, waving back at it from the door, "is mostly reserved for the dignitaries in the North West Company, the wintering partners, Montreal directors when they pay a visit, their chief factors and important guests.

From there they peeped into the bedchambers that were not then

occupied, and Keira marveled at how attractive they were. "Yes," Luc said, and added dryly, "they believe in enjoying their creature comforts."

They went back outside into the warm sunshine, and Luc pointed out the many factories, workshops, and stores, and the offices where business was conducted. Keira saw where the pelts were stored and sorted, the dressing and tanning sheds, the boatyard where canoes were built and repaired. And of course a powder magazine.

The compound hummed with activity, with tool-makers, tinsmiths, bakers, and carpenters all busily working at their trades, and there were private dwelling houses too for the people who lived there permanently. Hundreds of people were at work in the fort, including many Indians. There were also many Indian women, she noticed some wearing European clothes! and countless little children.

When it seemed to Keira that they had walked for miles around the orderly complex, she laughed. "I'm amazed! To think that this" she threw out her arms "is in the midst of nowhere."

Luc grinned and took her hand. "Let's see how Friar Tuck is doing."

"Friar Tuck?"

"You'll see," he laughed. "It's a nickname."

He led Keira to a large shed in a far corner of the fort. She smelled the fumes of the distillery long before they reached it, and could well understand why

it had been set apart from the rest of the buildings. Before they reached it, Keira stopped and wrinkled up her nose, but Luc walked up to the shed and stuck his nose in to inquire, "And what sort of poison are you brewing up today, Friar?"

A massive bald-headed man of about fifty appeared in the doorway, his back to Keira. He was dressed in a kind of leather smock that was spattered with virulent shades of red, yellow, and a verdigris green, and there were leather gauntlets on his hands. "Luc Duval!" he bellowed, and threw his arms about Luc in a bear hug, then drew back. "Have you just come in?" When Luc nodded, he said, "By any chance did you bring iodine with you? I'm stewing up some of my special Jamaica brandy today and need to add a spot of coloring." He laughed and nudged Luc in the ribs, "The redskin just can't get enough

of my brandy, but they like that rich brown shade." He turned then and saw Keira in the yard.

He looked as if he had seen a ghost, or one of the spirits the Indians were always talking about. After staring at her for what seemed forever, Friar turned questioningly to Luc, though he didn't say a word.

Luc brought Keira forward and introduced her. Even then it seemed to take the older man a moment to recover from what Keira began to think was akin to shock, but finally he stammered, "I . . . most delighted to meet you. Charmed . . . Keira MacKenzie, you say? Not related to Sir Alexander, are you, miss?"

Keira shook her head, wondering why the man seemed so ill at ease.

But he recovered finally, and now his eyes were appreciative. He winked at Luc, saying, "Well, Duval, now we know you have good taste. May I ask where you met this beautiful young lady?"

Keira was suddenly tense, but Luc passed it off

easily enough. "We met in Montreal," he said simply, and his eyes sought Keira's. "The gods were with me that day."

When they left the distillery, she turned to Luc curiously. "He seemed so so very surprised."

Luc slipped his arm around her waist and drew her close to him. "It's not every day that a beautiful white woman appears at Fort William."

"Surely he was joking about putting iodine in the brandy?"

"Probably," Luc responded evasively.

Keira caused a sensation at Fort William. In no more than an hour news of her arrival flashed around the complex, and there were over a thousand people there at the time. She was introduced to so many people that first day that Keira quickly forgot most of their names. How they stared at her! Much as Friar had done, almost all of them had turned questioningly to Luc.

"It's because you're so beautiful," Luc assured her, but still Keira was embarrassed, certain they were wondering about her relationship to Duval. She felt too in a curious way that some unspoken

communication passed between them and Luc, a subtle understanding but of course she was tired by then and felt sure she must be imagining things.

When Luc excused himself, saying he had some arrangements to make, Keira had coffee with the other two European women in the fort. Agnes Horsfield, the chef's wife, was a buxom matron with several chins and an avidly inquisitive manner. Ellen Milton, the doctor's wife, was a thin wisp of a woman with parchment skin and a nervous laugh. They struck Keira as being vastly different types, but they did share one thing in common both had very cynical eyes.

"Well then, what's a bonny young lass like you doing in the backcountry?" Mistress Horsfield began as they sipped coffee in a small breakfast room off the Great Hall. "You've fair turned the fort topsy-turvy, you have," she confessed. "The lads won't get over this for months."

Keira blushed. "Well . . . I"

"What a ridiculous question, Agnes!" chided Mistress Milton, seeing Keira's embarrassment. "You know quite well that Miss MacKenzie is with Monsieur Duval's brigade."

"Och, I ken *that*," replied the other with a dour glance at the doctor's wife. Then to Keira, "Ye're no' related to Luc, are ye?"

When Keira shook her head, Agnes then wanted to know whereabouts she had come from in Scotland, why she had left, and how long she had been in North America. Ellen Milton sniffed disapprovingly as the other woman peppered Keira with nosy questions, but Keira could tell she was interested just the same and as eager to hear the answers as the Scotswoman.

Keira was soon to learn that the two women loathed each other and rarely missed an opportunity to show it. Mrs. Milton, an Englishwoman, came from "class" while Mrs. Horsfield hailed from the commonalty, and in the opinion of the former no more need be said.

But both gaped at Keira skeptically when the girl explained that she worked for Monsieur Duval, as an assistant to his accountant and manager. Agnes was less subtle than Ellen Milton, and she burst out laughing. "Well I never! Work, did you say?" When Keira nodded, she chuckled, her chins wobbling, "And whit kind of *work* do ye dae?"

Keira threw a quick look in the direction of the door, praying that Luc would hurry back. While she realized that these two women, cut off from the

outside world for years at a time, were desperate for excitement and fresh gossip, she was annoyed that they had to pick on her. But uncomfortable as she felt, Keira tried hard not to show it and responded coolly, "I'm going to be clerking for Mr. Rawson"

"Going to be?" Ellen Milton burst out, her curiosity getting the better of her sense of decorum. "Then you are still in training"

"Training!" This sent the chef's wife into fits of laughter, but at the same time she put her hand on Keira's kindly enough, and said. obliquely, "Och, never you bother, hen, weve seen a lot o' funny arrangements oot here and it takes a lot to surprise us, does. it no", Ellie?"

Ellie giggled suddenly, a pealing sound that made Keira's nerves jump. "Yes indeed," she was forced to agree, though it went against the grain, "but I shan't sit here a moment longer and listen to you badger this poor girl with your prying"

"Awa ye go, ye nosy auld magpie!" the stout lady scoffed. "Ye collect gossip like a squirrel collects nuts. "Ye didna get that lang beak for nothing."

Ellen Milton glared at her, then leaned forward to appeal to Keira. "Now do you see the category of people I'm compelled to associate with here? As I was just telling Doctor, I truly don't know how much longer I shall be able to put up with it, truly I don't. I'm so glad you came, dear; it's such a refreshing change to have refined society about one for a change. You must promise to dine with Doctor and I."

"Ha!" snorted Agnes Horsfield. "And if ye dae dine wi' them ye'll soon see the kind o' man Doctor isa henpecked wee scunner!"

Thankfully, Luc returned and extricated Keira from the clutches of the two ladies, whom Keira heartily hoped she would not run into again while they were at Fort William. She was relieved too when

Luc informed her that they would not be dining with the others in the Great Hall that evening. "You're tired," he said, noting the strain on her face. "So I've arranged to have our meal brought to our private

quarters."

But the "private quarters" turned out to be another source of embarrassment for Keira. When Luc led her into a large attractive chamber off a corridor at the back of the main building, a room well furnished and appointed with a large double-sized bed, Keira spun on him quickly. "Are we *both* staying here?"

"Oui," Luc said. "Of course."

She flushed. "But everyone will know! I can't stay in the same room with you, Luc! Think how they will talk."

He closed the door and took her in his arms and gazed down into her frowning face. "Keira, I don't give a damn what they think"

"But I do!" she interrupted angrily. "Think of the reputation I'll get."

He burst out laughing, his eyes tender as they rested on her upturned face. "My sweet love, we are more than a thousand miles from civilization here and you worry about your reputation!" He kissed her quickly, then drew her to a chair and pulled her down on his knee, and from his pocket took out a tiny box and opened it. Her eyes widening in surprise and delight, Keira saw a gleaming gold ring winking up at her from a nest of black velvet. It was like a wedding band except that it had a diamond in the center.

Keira looked at the ring, then at the man, her heart brimming.

Very grave now, Luc lifted the ring from its box and slipped it onto the fourth finger of her *right* hand. "A token of my love for you," he murmured, and kissed her deeply, kissed her until Keira's head began to spin and all her foolish doubts flew out of her mind. And it

wasn't the only present that Luc had for her. He handed Keira a large box, and she opened it breathlessly to find, under layers of crisp white crinkly paper, a beautiful white satin and lace bedgown complete with matching robe, so fragile and slippery under her fingers that Keira gasped in wonder, never having dreamed that one day she would own anything so exquisite.

"Tonight we celebrate our union," Luc told her with a kiss, "just the two of us alone together, with no one to intrude on our love, and no silly thoughts to spoil things," he added meaningfully.

When a large wooden tub and jugs of hot water were brought to their room, Luc left her to bathe, saying that he would scour the dust of the journey off with a brisk swim in the lake, followed by half an hour in something he called a sweatbox. Startled, Keira laughed. "That sounds far from relaxing; it sounds more like punishment!"

Luc assured her it was most relaxing and the best way of getting clean. "It's an Indian invention," he explained, "though I understand that people in some of the Scandinavian countries have much the same thing. Some day you must try it."

Keira shuddered at the idea, and happily stepped into the tub.

She washed her hair until there wasn't a speck of dust left in it, then soaped and scrubbed every inch of her skin until it glowed pink. Every second or two she had to stop to admire her gorgeous new ring, and with a glance at the lovely chemise de nuit lying across the bed, she felt like the luckiest, most cherished girl in the world.

When the thought whispered across her mind that Luc should have placed the ring on her *left* hand, Keira was immediately angry with herself. Oh, she thought, how could she be so petty! How could she

quibble about something so small? She reminded herself that customs were radically different here in North America. Not only that, but Luc was French, and the French probably did things differently.

He loved her was that not enough? And he lavished her with endearments and affection and treated her like a treasured possession. Was that not enough?

Keira dried herself and rubbed vigorously at her hair, then combed it out until the red-blond strands glistened, marveling at how light it had become in the hot sunshine, as if it had taken some of the sun's rays into itself. Next, with a delicious shiver of anticipation, she lifted the fragile bedgown over her head, amazed at the erotic feeling it gave her to feel the slippery satin gliding down over her rosy flesh.

Then she darted to the looking-glass and both hands came up to clap her flushed cheeks. Under the virgin-white material of the bedgown her body had the rampant voluptuousness of a coquette! Her breasts swelled the shimmering material, the little nubs already standing out; the gown lay smooth over her hips emphasizing her curves in a most shameless fashion and she could even see the mysterious shadow of her most private areas!

"God, I can't go about like this!" Keira gasped. She hastily picked up the matching peignoir and slipped it on, but even *it* concealed very little, since it was mostly made of lace and trimmed only with the same satin as the undergarment.

For a minute a wicked feeling took hold of Keira and after a quick glance at the door, she began to twirl slowly in a kind of sensuous dance, making her hips sway and her breasts bob up and down, her hair fanning out like the silken fringe of a Spanish shawl. "What if I were to dance for him like this?" she thought breathlessly. "What if . . . would he find it exciting; find *me* exciting?"

All her life Keira had been praised because of her appearance, and long since she had grown indifferent to the compliments. Now, though, madly in love as she was, it was suddenly of vital importance to her that she look her most attractive to her beloved. She stopped dancing and gazed closely, critically at herself in the mirror, anxiously, scanning herself for flaws. "My eyes are like smoked crystal," she sighed. "How I wish they were blue!" And her nose was such a little insignificant thing, her mouth too full and pouty. Her forehead, a neat square with that peak of hair in the center of it, gave her the immature look of a wide-eyed child when she so much wanted to appear womanly in his eyes. But of course her body was *very* womanly, Keira thought, and giggled softly, thinking that in bed with the lights out Luc wouldn't see her face.

She frowned then, rather shocked by the wicked thoughts racing through her head and the equally wicked feelings pulsing through her.

"My love, my love," she sighed, "what have you done to me?"

Keira sat down in a chair by the window and primly folded her hands on her lap. "Be good!" she scolded the rogue inside her. "Behave yourself!"

And to think that she had once tried to get away from him! Now she couldn't wait to have him near. "Amazing," she murmured, "truly amazing." In some ways the astounding change in their relationship puzzled Keira; she simply could not fathom how it had come about, and so rapidly. She recalled being adamant at first that Luc Duval shouldn't dominate her or wield the rod of the master. Now . . . now just as he had once told her she would she reveled in being mastered by as handsome a conqueror as Luc Duval, and the rod he wielded brought her intense pleasure.

Luc opened the door quietly and found Keira

sitting placidly at the window, or so he thought. A halo of light surrounded her, the blazing afterglow of the setting sun, her hair outlined in flaming copper, her ripe young body seen clearly in silhouette, her gown made diaphanous by the strong light. She sat so still and looked so calm and serene and exquisitely lovely that Luc caught his breath. In a great surge of emotion he promised Keira silently, "You will never want for anything, least of all my love, not as long as I have breath in my body."

He went to her then and lifted her into his arms and kissed her so hungrily, yet tenderly, that Keira could feel his depth of emotion, and it flooded a tiny dark chamber of her heart where doubts were made and tugged at her to be heard. At that moment, as he whispered to her how much he adored her, the doubts were silenced, a door slammed shut.

When he felt the sweet curves of Keira under the glistening shimmer of her gown, Luc ached to carry her to the bed; ached so much that his body throbbed painfully. But he would not allow himself to take her quickly, as so often he had taken other women who meant nothing to him. Keira was special in every way; she was unique. And her life with him, especially their private times, must be made as exceptional as she was herself, Luc vowed.

He kissed her mouth, her throat, and, lifting her hands, the insides of her wrists. "A man could go mad with desire looking at you," he told her, his eyes bright with love. "I think I must keep you hidden away

where only I can see you for as long as we stay at Fort William."

Keira smiled, delighted. "Then you like the gown?"

"The gown!" He laughed, a roguish gleam in his eyes. "I like the gown so much that my fingers itch to tear it off you."

"Don't dare!" she gasped, shocked. "It's so pretty

and must have cost"

He advanced towards her, head down, and, giggling, Keira backed away.

"It was worth every penny for the pleasure it will give me when I rip it off," he growled, and suddenly sprang at her and, catching a handful of the skirt, whipped it high to expose her bare hips. When Keira squealed, slapping at his hands, Luc spun her around and crushed her against him, groaning, "Can you feel what you do to me?" And she could, forcefully! "Unless you want to starve to death and never rise from that bed yonder, get away from me, woman! Make haste and go back to your chair by the window before I lose my head."

Laughing, Keira strolled to the chair, taking care to swing her hips, and sat down. Smiling at him with the length of the room between them, she said sweetly, "Does this please you, sir?"

Luc took a step towards her when there was a knock on the door and a servant entered pushing a trolley on which was a veritable banquet of food.

"Lord, surely this can't *all* be for us?" Keira gasped when the man left. She stared in amazement at wafer-thin slices of roast beef, lake trout sprinkled with almonds, chicken in a creamy sauce. And crisp fresh vegetables of every sort and color, fluffy wild rice, and strawberries and cream. But that was not all! A huge dewy bunch of grapes lay on a silver platter; there were also wedges of cheese surrounded by a fan of crunchy bread sticks. And in a bucket rested several bottles of wine.

Luc laughed at her stunned expression. "We need to keep our strength up for the long night ahead."

"Oh . . . are we going out?" She looked disappointed.

"No, we are staying in."

She blushed.

They suddenly both discovered that they were ravenous. "Eat slowly," Luc advised, "and only a very little of everything." He grinned, adding, "Don't worry, there will be more food tomorrow or even tonight if you want it."

"In Scotland we were often hungry when the potato crops failed," she said, "and there were times when my people were starving, even though the laird always had plenty to eat." Her expression sobered as she surveyed the many dishes before them. "You know, in a way this makes me feel guilty."

"Guilty? But . . . why?"

"Because . . . it doesn't seem right to have plenty, more than enough to fill us, when there are so many people in the world who go hungry."

"Tell me about Scotland, my darling?" he asked her curiously, struck by the fact that he loved a woman he really knew very little about. He had wanted to question her before, but Keira's reticent manner put him off; Luc sensed that it was a painful subject for her and had avoided it.

Keira did tell him then, the first time she had been able to speak of it to anyone. "The last to die," she said, her voice breaking, "was my brother Gavin and how I loved that lad!"

Luc dropped his knife and fork and reached for her hands.

"I promised him, before he died, that one day I would tell our story," she went on very low, her bright eyes shadowed now, so that Luc was almost sorry he had brought it up. Yet in another way he was glad. Now he understood and could comfort her and try to make things up to her. He was horrified to learn of the misery she'd gone through and felt deeply ashamed of some of his own behavior now, which, he felt, must have seemed callous to her.

Keira raised brimming eyes to his face.

"I don't think people should be allowed to forget what happened in the Highlands," she said.

"Nor do I," Luc agreed, and reaching over stroked the tears from her

face. Then something occurred to him. "Soon you'll be able to *write down* the story of your clan, Keira, once you perfect your skills. And I'll make you a promise, if you write down your story I'll see to it that it's published, brought out in book form. Then thousands upon thousands will be able to read an account of it for themselves, the *true* story of why the clans vanished from the Highlands."

Light filled Keira's eyes. "Oh, would that be possible?"

"More than possible. I'll make it happen."

She sprang up and raced around the table and threw her arms around his neck, almost knocking him off his chair, so fierce was her embrace. "If you do that for me" her voice was shaking "you'll bring about the finest moment of my life. Then I'll know that my people will never be forgotten."

Luc stood up and took her in his arms, his own emotions unsteady. "Keira, there is nothing in this world that I *wouldn't* do for you," he told her, even as a voice inside him questioned, "Nothing?"

He picked her up and carried her to the bed.

They lay turned to face each other without speaking for several minutes, Luc's arm under her head, his hand on her left breast, and gazed into each other's eyes. He felt no hurry, and that surprised Luc; no grasping for quick appeasement, physical release. What he felt was a great calm, a sense of peace, almost a dreaminess as he gazed at Keira. Her beauty continually struck him afresh, continually delighted him, and her sweetness filled him with awe, humbling the arrogance that he realized was a part of his character. Beneath his hand he felt the beating of her heart, and it seemed to Luc that that pulsing beat entered his

own body and rose up his arm and across his chest to merge with the thud of his own heart. In the shadowy room her eyes were luminous and soft, bathing him with love.

Suddenly Luc knew that she must have everything! All of it! Anything less would be unthinkable. It would be very difficult and it would take time but somehow he would do it. And when it was settled he would marry Keira. The thought brought him an exquisite surge of joy. And *she* would be the chatelaine of the house he planned to build in Montreal, and also mistress of his forts in the wilderness, and she would go everywhere with him for the simple reason that he couldn't

bear to be parted from her at all.

Keira's senses leapt when his hand began to move on her breast, his palm lightly brushing her nipples. They came together urgently and their lips met, tongues seeking and entwining. She felt his warm breath, the touch of his skin on hers, and moved eagerly against him. With a groan Luc rolled on top of her and began kissing her feverishly, her breasts, shoulders, whispering over her ribcage to her quivering stomach, and slowly down to her thighs. Sweat broke out on his skin as he struggled to stay in control, determined to bring Keira a bouquet of sensuous delights which he wanted her to savor.

Very gently he parted her, then she felt the moistness of his tongue.

Moaning, Keira arched violently upward and suddenly she was on fire. Mindlessly her legs rose to encircle him and her body began to shudder, spasm after rapturous spasm jolting through her. "I can't bear it!" she gasped, and her flesh glistened with sweat. She could feel the waves rising, higher and higher, ready to crash down, shattering her senses.

Then he drew back.

She almost screamed, clutching at him frantically,

but Luc took her hands away, murmuring, "Wait. Make it last."

Keira, no longer able to think coherently, lost track of the times Luc brought her trembling to the brink of ecstasy, only to draw back, but there came a moment when it made no difference, when her body told him that the tide couldn't be stayed. He loomed above her then and their eyes met, then he drove down hard, sensing that the time for gentleness was past. And Keira moved with him as a wildness drove them now, and suddenly swept them over that high plateau into throbbing darkness.

Later that night Luc asked Keira about Lord Mathew, reasoning that since she'd mentioned his name the man must have some special significance to her. All she'd told him was that this nobleman had "ruined her family," but Luc felt there was more to it than that. And he wanted to know!

At mention of the hated name, Keira's warm, contented feelings fled and she frowned. "Oh, why did you have to speak of *him*?" She looked and sounded vexed, which only served to make Luc more determined.

"What did he mean to you?" he persisted, propping himself up on his elbow the better to see every nuance of expression on her face, and when she turned away he caught her face by the chin and made her look at him. He was serious now, slightly annoyed. "I have the right to know," he said.

He was jealous! Keira saw it in his eyes. She laughed, and the tension went out of her, amusement and happiness taking its place. The awareness of the power she had to change his mood pleased her greatly, since he so often could exert that power over her!

Watching him from under her lashes, she teased, "Oh . . . he was a dashing lord who took a fancy to

me . . ." Then suddenly she felt sick, and stopped.

"Well?" Luc growled.

"I hate him more than anyone else in the world!" Keira burst out fiercely. Though it pained her to talk about him and made her squirm in disgust, Luc managed to worm the whole story out of her, but it upset Keira and altered her mood. "And what of you?" she challenged, her tone a little peevish. "What do I know of *your* past?"

When Luc turned away, throwing himself on his back, it was Keira's turn to be jealous. She leaned over him, tugging none too gently at his hair, vague images of gorgeous women clinging to him, much as she had done, rising in her mind to torture her. He was so handsome, so worldly and well traveled, Keira thought anxiously, that there were bound to have been many women in his life. Worse, he had intimate knowledge of how to please a woman and there was only one way he could have learned that!

"Unless you relish having a bald lover, stop tearing at my hair," Luc said, and caught her hands. He kissed her, then said lightly, "Very well, at the risk of watching you yawn I'll tell you the story of my life."

Keira settled down to listen with avid interest, and his life, far from boring, kept her enthralled. But Luc made no mention of women.

By this time Keira was almost jumping with curiosity. She told herself that she had a choice; to ask him point-blank and betray her jealousy, or not ask at all and live ever afterwards with uncertainty and jealousy as well while she let her imagination run away with her.

"You've not mentioned any ladies," she said, trying to sound casual.

His brows rose. "You want me to name them all?" His eyes were twinkling with mischief, but Keira was not amused.

"Name the important ones," she snapped.

"Oh, let's see . . ." He began to tick names off on his fingers. "Colette, Nadine, Clarise, Marie. All the others, a few score, I've forgotten."

Keira gave him a severe look, but she knew he was jesting. Just the same, he hadn't *quite* answered her question and she had no intention of letting him off with it. "I know you are holding something back and it's not fair. I've been truthful with you."

"I swear on my mother's grave that I told you the absolute truth," was Luc's solemn reply. He even crossed his heart.

Keira had to smile at that, and the next moment they were tumbling about on the bed, then once more making love, and so it went until dawn.

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"Yes," John McLeod said, "we are definitely interested. But of course I cannot sanction a large-scale expedition without consulting the directors in Montreal, and that will take time." He examined the man seated across his large walnut desk and went on, "I presume, taking the weather into consideration, that you are anxious to leave without delay?"

"Within the fortnight," the other replied.

"I see." McLeod rose and walked to the window overlooking Fort William's docks, and stood for a moment deep in thought, absently rocking back and forth on his heels, his mind ticking like a clockwork toy gone haywire. He was the most senior partner of the North West Company then at the fort, and in fact he was avidly excited about the proposition just outlined to him, though he was careful to conceal that excitement. It was never a good idea, he felt, to give these eager young fellows their head or lead them to believe that they were indispensable, as they were

bound to start making outrageous financial demands, and he had no

intention, for various reasons, of throwing company funds at *this* one. But . . . he was exceedingly interested and had already made up his mind to outfit him for the trip west, though modestly.

The resident explorer and cartographer for Fort William was at that time away in Athabasca Country trying to assess the inroads the Hudson's Bay men had made on their territory, and would not be back for months. If McLeod could believe the young chap at his desk, if they didn't move immediately a competitor would beat them to it, and that didn't bear thinking about.

McLeod turned back to the desk. "We will fund an expedition," he said, "but it will be a small one. And, of course, we'll expect you to sign a contract with us," he added cannily, "for a period of three years."

Freddy Astor pretended to think about it for a minute, but it wasn't long before he nodded. "Yes, that will be quite acceptable."

They got down to business about salary, hashing out the practicalities of the exploration, the number of men Astor would take, the canoes, supplies and trade goods, the guides and interpreters, and so forth. All the while, in a subtle way John McLeod was studying his new employee. He had met Astor before, but only in passing. Freddy was too far down the totem pole for McLeod to take much notice of him. The older man realized that by hiring the chameleonlike Astor, who had quit his former company to seek employment with the North Westswitching employers, after all, was far from unusual in the tradehe was taking a certain risk, but if they didn't hire him, somebody else would, and the risks then would be even greater.

When Astor had first come to McLeod the previous day he had been quite open about his reasons for the move, knowing full well there was no point in trying

to conceal it since all these men knew each other. But he *did* bend the truth a little, saying he'd had a serious difference of opinion with his cousin John Jacob, for whom he had worked for seven years, and thereupon had been obliged to leave his company. Then he'd added, "At the time I left I was scheduled to lead an expedition to the Pacific. The plan was to try to establish a port there, which we felt strongly could be done."

McLeod had almost jumped ten feet off his chair at this piece of news.

Establishing a port on the faraway Pacific was the dream of *every* fur company, but especially vital to the North West. From their inception in 1783 the firm had labored under a terrible disadvantage through lack of a port closer to the trapping area than Montreal. This lack necessitated a long and tortuous route through rugged and dangerous terrain to take their pelts to market, a route that involved thousands of miles and shocking expense to the company. It was a drawback their chief rival didn't have, and because of it and the fact that Hudson Bay itself was closed to them they had had to branch out ever farther into the hinterland to secure their furs, then take a long and risky journey back to market.

But if a port could be established on the Pacific, an area known to abound in rich fur-bearing animals and the ocean itself teeming with otter, so desired in China, then most of their problems would be solved. From the Pacific it would be clean sailing round the Horn and then to London. But there was a serious problem to overcome before this could be done.

"You have found an expeditious passage through the Rockies?" McLeod inquired, hardly able to keep his tone calm.

Astor went to the large map behind McLeod's desk, a map with massive sections blank but the best to be

had at the time, and vaguely outlined the route he proposed to take. John was more than a little dubious, but again felt that they had little to lose since the expedition would not be lavishly funded. He ended the interview by saying, "I shall have to discuss this with the others, but come back to see me at the same time tomorrow."

Which Freddy had done. Now, contracted to lead the very same expedition for the North West Company as he'd been instructed to do for his cousin, Freddy left McLeod's office with mixed feelings, though great relief. During his hideous trip to Fort William he'd had lots of time to think, and concluded that he must take his chances about John Jacob finding out. He had no option, really. Anyway, he thought, self-interest had to come before anything else in this ruthless country, and people constantly moved from one company to another for a wide variety of reasons, so he was far from unique. In the end it was the first man to reach the finish line that counted.

When he left McLeod's office, Freddy returned to the tiny room he'd been allocated in the fort, an inferior little chamber he had to share

with two others, and after thinking for several minutes, sat down and wrote his cousin a heart-wrenching letter. Shortly after leaving Lachine, he wrote, his brigade had been attacked by a large war party of Iroquois, his canoes seized, goods stolen, and most of his crew scalped. By swimming underwater, almost drowning in the process, he said, he eventually managed to get away, only to have to wander wounded and starving through the wasteland for weeks. Eventually here he paused to consider carefully eventually some North West people happened by in time to save his life. When they offered him a job, he was too grateful for their help to refuse, he went on, adding that he wasn't sure yet what the work would entail, but, naturally,

whatever it was he must not refuse, considering all they had done for him.

Deciding that he'd be unwise to burn bridges, Freddy added, "When my work is finished for the North West Company, and I have the money to get back, I shall, of course, waste no time in returning to you, dear cousin. I trust you will understand the predicament I find myself in and not look *too* severely on what was an unavoidable failure." He signed it, "Your affectionate cousin, Freddy."

What a load off his mind! He felt quite light-headed and giddy once he'd finished. And oddly, he almost believed the contents of the letter himself, so reasonable did it sound. And that part about not knowing what work he'd be engaged in for the Nor'Westers . . . ! Oh, that was splendid, a stroke of genius. He laughed suddenly, pounding himself on the knees; laughed until tears ran down his cheeks and his pale eyes streamed.

Now! he thought, he wanted to be out and about to enjoy the pleasures of the fort. He'd skulked about his room from the time he arrived two days ago, sunk low in one of his black moods, convinced he should kill himself and get it over with. He couldn't believe he had ever felt that way now.

Whistling, Freddy went in search of a sweatbox. A bath and a shave was what he wanted! Then clean clothes, a good meal, and music. And later, of course, a woman.

Keira and Luc spent most of their first two days at Fort William in their room, a banquet of sensual delights and exploration, each eager to know every single detail about the other, and their curiosity wasn't

easy to satisfy. But eventually, Luc had to attend to business. On the Wednesday he had a meeting scheduled with John McLeod and some of

the other wintering partners.

"A wintering partner," he explained in answer to Keira's question, "is simply a partner who spends his winters in the upcountry, rather than visiting here and returning to Montreal."

Luc expected his meeting to be lengthy and suggested that Keira take the opportunity to look through some of the shops. He tried to put some money in her hand, smiling. "Buy yourself a pretty gown. There's to be a ball in a week and I think we'll stay for it." When she frowned, he said, misunderstanding, "You'll find something, I'm sure. You'll be surprised at the variety of the merchandise, even for women."

"I can't take the money."

Luc got angry then and forced it into her hand, closing her fingers around it. "Keira, none of your stubbornness. It pleases me to buy you things, and you *do* want to please me, don't you?"

She gave him a sidelong glance. "Can this be an advance on my wages, for when I start work, I mean?"

Luc stared at her in exasperation and almost blurted that she would never have to work, but something in her face stopped him just in time. "Yes," he said, hiding a smile, for he could never be angry with her for long. "Consider it an advance on your wages."

Keira took the money then and went out happily to buy her gown, but first she decided to look around for a while. It was July 28th and the weather was beautiful during the day, though the nights were sometimes still cooler than that or sticky-hot. When she stepped outside, Keira found the sky a searing blue and the air so sweet and clean and tangy with balsam and wood-smoke that it seemed to her like perfume.

Her first port of call was the huge fur warehouses, the reason all this existed, after all. Luc had instructed her to ask for a man called Wisdom. "Archie Wisdom

will give you the grand tour," he said.

He turned out to be a tiny little fellow of very slight build but had an air of brisk authority, and he seemed to Keira to be in perpetual motion, darting here, bouncing there, his small hands fluttering continuously. His mouth too, Keira soon discovered, was equally mobile and he peppered her with information about the pelts and the business in general as he rushed her through the place.

"There's a fortune in peltries in this one warehouse alone," Wisdom told her, waving around. "Most of the ones in here have already been graded and sorted and are soon to be shipped to Montreal, and from there to the auction rooms in London and elsewhere."

Keira gazed around, astonished at the piles, the thousands of pelts in the building, and of course she had to touch them, and even buried her face in them, and never had anything felt as soft. Wisdom laughed tolerantly and quite proudly as Keira cooed over the beaver, mink, musquash, marten, and so many others she forgot their names almost as soon as Wisdom told her what it was. "Know what that one is?" he said, and draped a tawny, spotted fur over her arms. When she shook her head, he said, "That's a lynx, and very rare but I'll show you one I think you'll like even better." He told her to close her eyes, then led her around the fifty-foot-long table, one of the many in the warehouse stacked with pelts, and lifted a fur off a rack near the back of the room. This he carefully draped around Keira's shoulders.

"Now you can look," he said.

Keira saw the arctic fox then, the most beautiful fur she had ever seen, thick and lush and snowy white, so pristine white that the tips seemed to have been brushed with silver. She was speechless for a moment as she rubbed her cheek against its softness, then, looking up, she laughed. "I want to keep it! It makes

me feel like aa princess."

"It's very costly for the simple reason that it's hard to find," Wisdom explained. "Though it's not *the* most costly fur in the world. But to get this" he touched a respectful finger to the pelt "a trapper has to spend long weeks and months in frozen tundra. You see, they are very shy creatures, and the price he has to pay is often not worth it. The biggest danger is snow blindness, and close upon it, frostbite. You can't discount abject loneliness either; that too is a disease in the far north." He grinned as he lifted the deliciously warm fur off Keira's shoulders, muttering, "Sorry, dear," as he took it away from her and

hung it back on the rack. Then he went on, "Women always fall in love with the snow fox, Russian women especially. They say the Tsarina sleeps in a bed made out of these furs during the hard winters they get there; she seems to prefer it even over their own sable, even though sable costs much more to buy."

"Then you sell most of these furs in Russia?"

"Oh no!" Wisdom shook his head. "The Russians catch their own here. There's a big Russian fur company up north all the time prowling around and laying claim to everything in sight."

"In North America?" Keira was surprised.

"Yes indeed!" He compressed his lips, looking annoyed. "Everybody is fighting and trying to grasp some part or other of this vast country, the Russians, Spanish, Dutch, and of course, us. Then too, the Americans." He laughed. "They've managed to grab quite a chunk, including most of our good fur territory along the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers." There was grudging admiration in his voice as he added, "Some of them have even ventured into the Rockies, but they are mostly lone trappers rather than organized companies, and wild men they are too!"

Keira was glad that Luc had referred her to Wis-

dom. He was so interesting to talk to, and made things so clear for her that Keira almost forgot to go out and buy her gown.

From the warehouse manager she learned that now, at the end of July, the rivers were finally open into the interior so that the distant Indian tribesmen could bring their furs to the forts. Wisdom then proceeded to take Keira down to the docks, where much activity was going on, and she saw for herself some of the Indians sailing in with their canoes loaded with pelts, and through interpreters, loudly bargaining for the best price for them. No actual money changed hands. "Money is no good to these people," Wisdom told her. Instead, they were given what he called dockets in fact, pieces of wood that enabled them to purchase goods at the various company stores in Fort William.

"What they like best is firewater," her tour guide said with a grin.

"Firewater?"

"Alcohol of various kinds."

Keira laughed. "What a funny name for it."

"It makes sense, though." The Indians, he said, checked the strength of the liquor they were given by tossing a little of it in a fire. Good stuff blazed brightly; watered-down alcohol hardly caused as much as a puff of flame. "They aren't stupid," Wisdom said. "They know the white man's tricks. The redskin can be dangerous when he's denied his firewater; come to think of it, he can be dangerous with it too." He laughed ruefully.

Keira remembered Friar asking Luc for iodine the day they arrived, saying he wanted it to make his brandy the acceptable shade, a request that had horrified her. Now Wisdom was telling her that the traders diluted the alcohol, undoubtedly to make it go farther, and cheating the Indians in the process.

As they watched a canoe being unloaded, Keira said, "Why do the traders pay the Indians with alcohol if it makes them dangerous?"

"Because the red man won't do business without it," he replied at once. "They've taken to the stuff like the proverbial duck to water"

"Taken to it?" Keira frowned. "You mean . . . they didn't have it before white men came here?"

"They had their own grog; a kind of mead, though I don't think it was habit-forming, though many would disagree. Anyway, they seem to like our much more potent stuff far better. You'll see for yourself if you go outside the stockade at night but make sure Luc goes with you."

"That sounds unpleasant"

"Perhaps so, but it's a fact of life."

Finally Keira remembered her gown and after thanking Mr. Wisdom for taking the time to explain everything to her, said she had to leave.

He looked at her soberly for a moment and then said, "You may see many things here not just at Fort William but all over the Northwest that will seem harsh to you, but remember that this is a harsh country, my dear, and there's no place in it for the faint-hearted or squeamish." He patted her arm, seeing that she was a bit subdued. "You'll fare much better if you learn to accept things as they are, because I'll promise you this, you'll never change them."

Keira left then, faintly apprehensive as she wondered what *else* she might see and hear that would upset her little realizing that she would be thoroughly jaded with the fur trade before they left Fort William and deeply sorry for the poor Indians who supplied them with their furs that made the traders rich, even as they destroyed the men who trapped them.

She was glad to distract herself with the shops. They

were much as Luc had described, bursting with a huge variety of merchandise, much of it quite luxurious. Before that afternoon was over, Keira could see that the traders here, particularly the partners, liked to be good to themselves and to live in great style, even if they were in the remote backwoods.

In a large clothing store that was separated into sections for men and women, Keira found quite a good selection of ready-made gowns to choose from. There were several female customers in the shop, all Indian women, some with children, and these ladies were dressed in European apparel. Not only that, but many of them spoke broken English or a language Keira knew by now was French. Everyone seemed to be buying things.

Keira was so interested that she found her attention straying from the clothes. A little girl caught her eye, a child of about five, and came skipping over. "What's your name?" she asked Keira in the blunt way of children.

Keira told her, then asked, smiling, "And may I know yours?"

"I'm Elizabeth McLeod," the girl piped. "Are you buying a pretty dress for the ball?"

Keira nodded. "If I can find something I"

"My mother is too." The girl pointed down the store to where her mother, an attractive Indian woman, was chatting with a clerk. She had a baby in her arms and a toddler clinging to her skirts, prompting Keira to ask the older girl, "Are you the biggest in the family?"

"Me?" Her black eyes widened and she laughed. "Oh no," with an emphatic shaking of the head, "I've got two big brothers and two big sisters. I'm just in the middle."

Seven children! Keira was startled, especially as their mother

appeared to be no more than twenty-five years old.

Keira looked closely at Elizabeth McLeod, a young lady who was missing her two front teeth. She was a pretty little girl with a light, creamy skin, brownish hair, and very dark eyes, but altogether she wasn't as dark as the average Indian. Keira felt certain that her father must be white, as her name would suggest, though many Indians adopted European names, or so Jasper had told her, so she couldn't go by that.

"I'm sure *you* must wish you could go to the ball?" Keira asked her.

"I will when I'm grown up."

When Elizabeth noticed that her mother was about to leave the store, she waved hastily to Keira and flew after her.

"A sweet wee lassie, isn't she?" the clerk remarked when the family left. "Elizabeth is Mr. McLeod's favorite," he smiled, "and it's easy to see why. She's a dear wee thing."

Keira stared at him. She had heard Luc mention the name McLeod in reference to the senior partner at the fort, but no, she thought, it couldn't be, because Luc had also told her that McLeod had two grown-up sons in the business in Montreal, and that his wife was visiting her family in Scotland at that very moment. McLeod is a common name, she thought, and shrugged.

It was getting late, and Keira turned her full attention to the racks of clothes, and finally chose a stunning midnight blue chiffon and lace gown frosted with silver because it made her think of moonlight, and from now on the moon would always have great significance for her. She smiled to herself as she watched the clerk fold it between tissue paper in a large box, wondering if Luc would make the connection.

Keira left the store carrying the box and hadn't gone far across the main square when she heard her

name called. Turning, she was startled to see Frederick Astor hurrying towards her from the river. He stared at her as if he were seeing a ghost. Keira had to smile, remembering that this was the brash young man who had asked her to marry him jokingly, of course.

"What on earth are you doing here?" she inquired when he stopped

beside her, his light-colored eyes eagerly roving her face, as if he couldn't quite believe that she was real.

"I've come to claim my bride," he replied.

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Keira laughed. "And what would you do if I accepted?" she asked him in a bantering tone.

"I would be the happiest man in all of the Northwest."

Her smile faltered when she saw that he was quite serious. Keira felt awkward and sought to hang onto a sense of levity. "Very gallant, Mr. Astor, but I'm sure you wouldn't stop running until you were a thousand miles away." Anxious to change the subject, she asked, "What are you doing in Fort William?"

"I work for the North West Company," he said. "I've been commissioned to lead in expedition to the Pacific coast." There was the merest hint of boastfulness in his tone, and Freddy, desperate to inflate himself in her eyes, elaborated, "The idea is to try to establish a port at the mouth of the Columbia River. It won't be easy, but I have high hopes."

Keira looked suitably impressed, which he found gratifying.

"Did you have a good journey here from Lachine?" Freddy asked her casually, though watching her closely all the while; staring so intently that Keira began to get embarrassed. "No special difficulties on the way, I trust?" he went on, then lied, "I had no trouble myself, but I heard of others who did. There's a branch of the Iroquois who are said to be on the rampage."

Keira replied that they'd had some trouble, but she didn't expand. She found it disturbing the way Astor was gazing at her, and couldn't forget that Luc had a jealous streak, which delighted her, really, and made her feel cherished. The last thing she wanted was to give the gossips at the fort room to talk, and already she could see eyes watching them.

"Would you do me the honor of having coffee with me?" Astor requested in his formally polite way. He spoke excellent English, but with a heavy German accent.

"Oh, I'm sorry, but I can't." So as not to hurt his feelings, Keira feigned regret. "I'm late as it is, and I really must get back to Luto my party."

Freddy studied her for a moment, his eyes moving from her face to the large box in her hand. "Then allow me to carry that back for you; it looks heavy."

Smiling, Keira shook her head, jiggling the package up and down to demonstrate that it was quite light.

"That's a very pretty ring," he said, and regarded her inquisitively.

Lord, Keira thought, the man missed nothing!

"Thank you," was all she said.

Astor made no move to go but continued to stand there with a silly smile, so that finally Keira had to take the initiative and move away. "I'm sure we will run into each other again," she said casually, feeling that she had to say *something* since he looked so downcast, and with a wave she hurried off, thinking

that Frederick Astor wasn't quite the man she'd first thought he was. During their brief contact in Lachine, Freddy had given her the impression that he was light-hearted and gay, perhaps a bit of a rogue with an eye for the ladies. Now, though, she wasn't so sure. Dear God! she thought, surely the man can't be *serious* about wanting to marry me! We don't know each other at all.

There was no hiding away in their room that night. For form's sake they had to make an appearance in the Great Hall where the partners, the chief factor, traders, senior clerks, and anyone of importance who happened to be visiting Fort William at the time, dined, and dined in style! Keira dreaded going among them, fearing they might have heard gossip about Luc and her sharing the same room. Her tension grew steadily as she dressed in the dusky-blue calico gown and braided back the front of her hair, almost a strawberry blonde now, and wound a ribbon through it. She kept stealing quick glances at Luc to see if he shared her discomfort, but he seemed relaxed and happy enough and very handsome in his smart dove-gray suit that showed off his tan so well that Keira hesitated about mentioning her feelings, afraid of spoiling his mood.

Luc, she had observed, had a very quick temper, and he could be impatient at times. Ah, she thought, her heart swelling with love, but

he was never angry for long, nor the type to hold grudges. As quick as his anger flared, it was just as quick to die. Keira ran over to him and carefully fixed his stock, fussing in proprietary fashion. "You men! You never get things like this right."

"That's why God created women," he said, tongue in cheek.

Keira looked up at him from the corner of her eyes.

"Oh, so *that's* the reason? All we need do is make sure you look good"

"And *feel* good." His arms closed around her and he gave her such a passionate kiss that her knees buckled, but when he tried to drag her to the bed, Keira slapped his hands away, laughing. "*You* were the one who wanted to go to this dinner, and if we don't go now, this minute, I know we'll never budge from this room."

Luc gave her a probing look. "Don't worry about the dinner. Fur traders tend to be a hale and hearty lot with a motto of live and let live. They don't make judgments, or at least most of them don't. And the others can go to hell."

So they went and Keira had a very good time.

Luc, she saw, was right. Nobody, by word or deed, made her feel in the least uncomfortable. Far from it, they seemed to go out of their way to make sure she had an enjoyable time. Not only were they amusing and charming but they showered her with so many compliments that Keira began to feel embarrassed. "They are just desperate for female companionship," she told herself. There were about fifty men in the huge room and only three women, Mrs. Horsfield, Mrs. Milton, and herself.

After an excellent meal of many courses and plentiful wine, a piper came in and commenced playing all the old songs of Scotland. For a moment or two Keira had to fight back tears as a sudden pang of homesickness smote her and all the memories came rushing back. Then Luc, watching her, took her hand in full view of everyone present and leaned over to whisper, "I love you very much." After a brief struggle with herself, Keira began to feel better. This was her home now, she told herself staunchly. And Luc was her man. One day her heart soared at the thought of it they

would start their own family. Besides, there was nothing in Scotland

to go back to.

Quickly the music became jaunty, the songs a bit naughty, and everyone joined in the singing, with John McLeod himself favoring them with a medley of ribald tunes. Keira was surprised, but she laughed as heartily as all the others and liked McLeod the better for it, impressed that such an important man was not too filled with his own importance to unbend. Another fellow rose to recite poetry . . . and so the evening passed very pleasantly.

The night was even better once they were alone.

The following night they dined in the Great Hall again, and again Keira enjoyed it. Then, once dinner was over, they decided to go out for a walk.

It was a beautiful warm evening, with fireflies-twinkling among the trees and a glittering spray of stars overhead, the sky a deep purple-black. The lighted buildings inside the high stockade fence looked cheery and somehow comforting amid the vast ocean* of darkness beyond, and as they strolled along at leisure, with Luc's arm around her waist, they could still hear jolly music coming from the Great Hall and the sound of men's voices raised in singing. There was activity outside the fence too. It was here the many hundreds of voyageurs had their camps, including Luc's, and there were other people as well, Indians who worked at the fort, lone trappers not connected to any special company, native guides and interpreters, and the tipis or shacks where the Indian families lived that were connected to Fort William in one way or another.

As they neared one of the gates in the fence and moved away from the sound of fiddlers strumming and people singing inside the Great Hall, another far less sanguine sound of revelry assaulted their ears. It sounded to Keira like an unholy combination of

shrieking, laughing, wailing, and battling all going on at once.

She stopped abruptly. "Dear God, what's that?"

Luc's eyes narrowed, but he shrugged. "Probably the Indians having a party."

"A party! That's no party! Someone is getting badly hurt out there."

His smile was thin. "That could be, but there's no stopping them"

"Well, we ought to do something!" Keira protested. "We can't just stand here with people screaming like that."

Luc made to put his arm around her again and turn her away from the gate, but Keira pulled free, ran to the gate, and managed to get it open. She was through it and running across a small field in the direction of the noise before Luc could stop her. "Keira, come back here!" he yelled after her. "Keira, I'm warning you . . ."

But she ignored him. All she could think of was that someone was getting killed and they had to do something. She shouted back over her shoulder, "Go get some of the men from the fort."

It was only a few hundred feet to the main Indian campground, and for a moment, as she neared it, Keira thought the whole place was on fire. There were in fact several shacks burning, and as she ran up, panting and terrified, she saw naked figures stumbling about throwing blazing fagots around, one of the figures a boy about eight years old.

"Stop!" Keira screamed. "What in God's name are you doing that for?"

Then she saw inside the largest of the sheds.

She stopped, stuffing her fist to her mouth. Before Keira was a scene straight from hell, and the fumes of cheap alcohol were ghastly. The Indians, she saw, were having a drinking spree, and Keira couldn't believe

the frightful picture they presented to her shocked eyes. Men, women, and even children packed the shed, some reeling about with weapons in their hands, battering anyone that came within arm's length. Others wrestled with each other on the floor, some of them fighting viciously, or making love, all in various states of undress or outright naked. Blood and vomit were everywhere. The bellowing and howling and insane laughter were fearful. As she stared, Keira saw one man strike another with a hatchet, splitting his head open like a ripe fruit. Retching, she began to back away and backed right into Luc.

He carried her bodily away from the place, his grip on her none too gentle, and once inside the stockade fence he spun her around to face him.

His eyes were blazing. "Don't ever do that again!" he shouted, and for a moment Keira thought he would hit her. "Don't you realize you could have been killed? Or raped? They" he waved through the

gate"have no idea *what* they're doing in that state, and God help anyone who gets in the way. Come on." He seized her by the arm and angrily propelled her back to their building and into their room. Once inside, Luc banged the door behind them, and when he turned to look at her Keira had never seen him so angry. His strong face was tight and grim, his mouth hard, and his eyes murderous. For a moment he didn't speak; Keira sensed that he didn't *trust* himself to speak. Then he roared, "Get to bed before I forget myself and give you the beating you deserve for disobeying me!"

She knew better than to argue with him just then, and turned away and began to undress, then without another glance at him got into bed and faced the wall. When he gets in beside me, she thought furiously, he'd better not try to touch me.

But he didn't join her in bed. Keira heard the door

wrenched open and bang closed, and she was alone.

She burst into tears. Then she began to shake uncontrollably, gagging when she thought of the things she had seen tonight and nobody was doing anything about it! Keira had a wild impulse to leap out of bed and run into the corridor yelling for help at the top of her lungs, but she knew by then that nobody would respond; that they accepted such awful happenings as being normal.

She lay for hours reeling in shock. "What kind of life is this?" she asked herself over and over. "And what kind of people are they to allow it to go on?"

"It's been going on for years," Luc said, and sighed. "Since long before I got into the business. It was the same in my father's time, but" he had to admit it "it has become much worse with the conflict between the North West Company and Hudson's Bay. The Indians want liquor the traders want furs, so," he shrugged, "the two major companies try to outdo each other to gratify their desire in the hopes that they'll bring their pelts to *them*."

Keira didn't look at him, though she listened. She sat white-faced at the breakfast table without touching her food, her eyes turned to the window.

Luc had come back to their room early that morning and insisted on speaking to her, and he wouldn't take no for an answer. "Be mature about this, Keira," he said when she wouldn't even look at him. "We

have to talk about it. We can't be together for thousands of miles and say nothing, now can we?"

Then he asked her to get dressed and they would discuss the problem over breakfast.

Now, though Keira's manner was frigid, Luc put his hand over hers and told her softly, "I'm sorry I was angry last night, but you could have been badly hurt or even killed." He leaned over the table and dropped

his voice, adding, "I love you. It's natural that I'd be upset."

She thawed a little, but there was a question she had to ask him.

"Do you supply the Indians with liquor?"

There was a tiny pause, then he nodded. "When they come to my forts with the furs, they have a wide variety of things to choose from in exchange for them. If they choose liquor, that is entirely up to them. I can't dictate their taste, any more than one can do with anyone. If it's firewater they want, there isn't much I can do about it short of taking the risk that they'll go elsewhere with their pelts."

"And of course you aren't prepared to take that risk?" she retorted sarcastically.

Luc's face hardened and his eyes went very cold. "My aim is to stay in business, not go out of it, especially when there isn't a damned thing I can do to make them stop drinking."

They sat tensely without speaking for the rest of the meal and all the way back to their room. Keira's mind was swimming; she didn't know what to think. Suddenly she remembered the Buzzard People and their dreadful celebration following the return of the war party. They had certainly been drunk enough then! And supposedly they had spurned all contact with white men, which had to mean that they had concocted their own brew. And as Luc had said, he wasn't responsible for them drinking in the first place, nor could he dictate their tastes. And if they wouldn't do business without it . . .

Keira sat down in the chair at the window and rested her chin in her hand, wondering if she'd been unfair to Luc, blaming him for everything, or so it must seem to him. She had known, even before she left Scotland, that the world was a harsh place and no amount of

trying would turn it into paradise. Nor turn

people into saints!

She peeped at Luc from the corner of her eye to find him watching her. Quickly he came to her and drew her out of the chair and into his arms, then his mouth was on hers, his strong arms holding her close, and Keira thought, with a deep sigh, that this was as close to paradise as she would ever get.

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The days passed quickly at Fort William, and though this was supposed to be a rest stop not a one of them relaxed very much, caught up in the humming activity of the place. Luc was often in conference with the North West people discussing business, including their latest conflicts with their rivals, the Hudson's Bay Company, conflict that could seriously affect him since it was known that his sympathies generally lay with the Scottish merchants, though he did remark sardonically to Keira, "The North West are far from spotless. They didn't capture the bulk of the trade through being timid, believe me, nor will they give it up without a fight, and it will be a fight to the death, with one or the other going under in the process."

She learned that they would spend the winter at Luc's fort in the Athabasca Country, and the following summer, as soon as the rivers and lakes were free of ice sometimes not until late July or even early

August they would make their return trip back to Montreal with all the precious furs that the Indians had brought to Luc's Fort Arrowhead. "Then I'll buy you anything in the world your heart desires!" he said with a smile, and hugged her.

Keira, as she did constantly, admired her ring, wondering when Luc would put it on the *proper* finger and signal to that world he talked about that they were well and truly betrothed. Surely, she reflected, that magic moment would take place long before they left Fort Arrowhead to return to Montreal. Sometimes their present mode of living troubled Keira. Much as she loved Luc, it wasn't right. And there was always the danger, a very real danger considering the constant physical demonstrations of that love, that she would find herself with child. Then, if they weren't wed, what should have been a wonderful, joyous happening would be ruination for her.

She gazed at her ring, and more and more ached for Luc to make his intentions clear to her; to discuss their future together. As it was, that future still remained obscure, and obscurity brought insecurity and a flood of doubts, doubts that tainted Keira's happiness and sometimes caused her to be a little sharp with Luc. "Ask me to marry you!" she felt like screaming at him. "Or at least tell me that we are properly betrothed!"

She began to pry into his background, and remembering that he had spent his young manhood in Parissaid to be the naughtiest city in the worldKeira was driven to probe. "How did you spend your free time while you were in France?" she queried one night after they had made love.

He shrugged. "There's no want of amusements in Paristhe great art galleries, opera, ballet, and the restaurants and cafesI kept myself occupied with no trouble." Here he gave a strange little smile that

Keira felt shut her out, since she didn't understand the meaning of it.

She burst out, "You must have had someone to share all these things with?"

"Now and then," Luc admitted, and lay down on his back with his bronzed arms behind his head, leaving Keira feeling suddenly cold and neglected. Then, as if oblivious to her inner suffering, he began to hum some French tune under his breath, as if it had just come back into his mind from the past.

Keira, leaning over him, felt a stab of anger. How could he just lie there humming some silly French ditty when she was so upset? She made herself look at him coldly, in a detached way, wondering if she could have blinded herself to certain traits in Luc that didn't deserve loving.

He lay stretched out on his back with one muscular leg raised, his arms thrown back casually, so dark against the pillow, his eyes closed now as if he were in the throes of some pleasant dream, or some equally pleasant memory.

A fierce stab of jealousy shot through Keira. She wanted to seize him by the hair and batter his head against the wall, or run her nails down over that taut stomach and make him howl. Why did he have to be so handsome? she groaned inwardly. Why did he have to be so charmingwhen he wanted to be, of coursethe type of man women lost

their foolish heads over? He looked like a contented tomcat after a successful night prowling the alleys his tanned body, hard and strong, the very picture of virility and masculine beauty, that dark copper skin, the blue-black hair, even his face in profile had the power to stir her and fill her with a burning desire. Even the sound of his voice!

But he could also be arrogant, ruthless, quick-tempered and impatient! And he had moments when

he could be cold and insensitive . . . almost cruel. Yes, Keira thought, eager now to see his flaws, there was certainly room for much improvement in Monsieur Luc Duval! Typically, Keira began to scold *herself*. "A more sensible lass would have steered clear of such a man, knowing his power to hurt her, but you you blundered right in!" It was never wise, she saw now, to tie one's fortunes to a handsome devil with a quick, clever mind, soaring self-confidence, reckless courage, and vaulting ambition.

When *when* was he going to ask her to marry him?

Luc stared at her in silence.

It seemed to him that Keira was bathed in radiance and beauty as she stood shyly before him in her new midnight-blue ballgown, her shining sun-kissed hair piled high on her neat little head, silken tendrils curling about her face. Her flawless breasts, and they *were* flawless, as he knew from experience, rose proudly and yet tenderly from the low-scooped neckline of her dress, a creation that billowed out like a dark cloud over her hips and legs, the skirt scalloped and brushed with silver.

Luc was overcome with a rush of pride and love so fierce that he found himself thinking, Soon she'll be the toast of Montreal and of Paris too!

But aloud, he said, "I can't take you to the ball."

Keira looked crushed. "You . . . you don't like the gown?"

"I don't like the idea of every man in the hall desperate to ravish you."

The sparkle instantly returned to her eyes. "Then you *do* like it?"

He nodded emphatically. "Just don't let me near you, and certainly don't allow me to touch you if you really want to go to that ball,

because if you do I can't

be held responsible for my actions. You are bewitching tonight . . . and you bring out the warlock in *me*."

Keira giggled. "Oh," she said, "I have that fellow in my arms *every* night."

Luc went to a wardrobe and returned carrying a large box. Placing it in Keira's hands, he murmured, "For the delight of my heart, and may it warm you always as much as you warm me."

She tore it open, and gasped. The beautiful arctic fur, now made into a cape, lay before her. Luc picked it up and gently placed it around her shoulders, then hugged her close. "Wisdom told me how much you wanted it," he said softly.

Then Keira said a very thoughtless thing, which she instantly regretted.

Stroking the fur, and never had she seen or felt anything as pure and lovely, she remarked, "Oh, Luc . . . how sweet you are and how you spoil me, but, you know . . . in a way it makes me sad to wear this when I think that once upon a time this was a living animal roaming . . ."

Keira felt the change in him immediately. He went very still, then his arms fell away from her and he stepped back. The minute she saw his hurt expression she could have cut her tongue out. "I've already explained," he said, his voice cool and frighteningly impersonal, "that these fur-bearing animals must be regularly culled, otherwise they will die slowly of starvation. Long before the white man came to North America the Indians knew that and hunted to prevent them from overbreeding."

There was a dreadful silence.

"Shall we go?" Luc waved to the door, his manner aloof.

It should have been a glorious evening for Keira's first ball, a handsome man at her side, her

beautiful dress, everyone staring in admiration when she walked into the Great Hall, which was lavishly decorated for the occasion and

blazing with light, a warm air of conviviality and excitement about.

But she was miserable from the start, and Luc didn't thaw out all evening.

The ball, with all its gaiety and color and the high spirits of the guests, was in such sharp contrast to her inner turmoil that soon it began to take on a mocking, nightmarish quality that left her in a daze.

Faces, conversation, and laughter flitted before her eyes and jarred her ears. The kingly feast of salmon, sturgeon, wild duck, and plovers stuck in her throat, and the fresh fruit, great silver bowls dripping with grapes, strawberries, plums, and raspberries tasted bitter, the clotted cream sour. There was a gushing fountain of sparkling wines. Keira couldn't make herself drink. And the candlelight hurt her eyes and made them tear.

Now and then, during dinner, she glanced at Luc. He was always gazing elsewhere. She tried to make conversation, but his response was perfunctory and stilted, his attitude insultingly detached. He chatted mostly to the people on either side of him as he sat directly opposite Keira at table.

When she felt that at any moment she would burst into tears and make a spectacle of herself, or worse, be sick, Keira's old spirit came back and she took herself in hand. Very well, she told herself, so you've had a quarrel . . . though, really, it could hardly be called that since no harsh words had been spoken—just cold words. And that was worse! But, her mind rushed on, it was not the end of the world and lots of couples had their tiffs and differences of opinion and quickly got over it. Certainly they would too. In the meantime she was silly to let it spoil her fun.

Keira plucked a glass of wine from the table and

swallowed it at a gulp. There was a band tonight and after the meal the music took on a lively skirl and people got up to dance. Only now as the dance floor filled did she notice how many Indian women were at the ball. There were dozens of them, perhaps forty or more, most wearing pretty European gowns like herself. Some of the women seemed shockingly young to Keira, far younger than herself. She was instantly distracted from her own troubles as she watched them whirling around the dance floor in the arms of the men, some of them old enough to be their fathers—in some cases, their grandfathers.

Keira spied Elizabeth McLeod's attractive mother, the woman she had seen in the store at the time she was searching for a gown, and Keira stared she was dancing with *John McLeod*, a gentleman that Luc had introduced Keira to two days before. Her mind made a connection then, but one that didn't make sense to her. The couple could hardly be married when McLeod already *had* a wife in Montreal as well as grown-up children. Yet . . . little Elizabeth had clearly told Keira that her last name was McLeod.

Forgetting that they were on the outs, Keira leaned over the table and caught Luc's arm to attract his wandering attention. "What relationship does that Indian woman have with Mr. McLeod?" she whispered under her breath.

Luc shook his head, pretending not to hear her.

But she repeated her question, adding, "I met her in one of the stores, and her little girl told me that her name was Elizabeth McLeod. But . . . how can that be?" She looked puzzled. "She can hardly be his wife if he already has one."

Annoyed as he was with Keira, and suddenly weary of all the subterfuge, Luc's recklessness flared. "Yes," he said, "his wife à la façon du pays."

She stared at him. "What does that mean?"

"You must learn French and find out."

Keira recoiled. So hurt was she by his cold, biting response to her question that she almost hated him at that moment. Feeling her eyes stinging with tears, she hastily looked away, and that's when she saw an eager Frederick Astor making straight for her table, smiling and flushed as a bashful boy. His silvery eyes fairly gobbled Keira, then, remembering his manners, he turned to Luc. "May I would be honored if you would give me permission to dance with Miss MacKenzie?" he stammered, and smartly clicked his heels.

Keira's heart cracked when she saw Luc give a nonchalant shrug. "Of course," he drawled carelessly, and immediately turned to continue his conversation with the man seated next to him.

There was one instant when Keira felt she would have to fly weeping from the room, and once outside, throw herself in the river. Then she felt Freddy Astor's arms go about her and looked up into his shining,

lovesick eyes, and it was like having soothing balm poured onto a gaping wound.

"I cannot . . . no"he shook his head"there are no words strong enough to describe adequately how beautiful you are," he told her with a catch in his voice and *real* emotion on his face, a face that was now the color of a ripe plum. "In all my travels I have never encountered anyone so fair . . . nor so sweet and . . . and good as you are, Miss MacKenzie."

Keira laughed shakily. "How do you know I'm good?" she asked him pertly, struggling to gather her shattered emotions about her, her strong sense of pride refusing to allow her to crumble completely.

Astor's fair brows shot up. "How do I know?" Suddenly he removed his hand from hers and thumped his chest over his heart. "This tells me that I'm gazing at one of life's true masterpieces"

"Oh, do stop!" Keira giggled, but was a little embarrassed too. "I'm far from a masterpiece. I'm a simple girl, really, and far from perfect."

"Not to me. I mean, I knew you were special from the first." He thought a minute as they danced slowly around the room, trying to put into words the passionate mixture of emotions the girl stirred in him, feelingshe was ashamed to face itthat were good and bad at once. But deliriously exciting!

He cocked his head to the side, a faint smile touching his lips.

"You know, you still haven't answered my question," he said.

Keira's mind had started to wander back to Luc, and she glanced up at Astor with a frown. "What question?" Then, "Oh!" as she remembered. The smile she gave him was unconsciously provocative. "Before I can possibly answer such an important question, sir, I must have your credentials."

To her surprise, Astor took it seriously. He came from a God-fearing family in Bavaria, he told her, and had received a good education, one that stressed languages and music. "My parents were far from rich," he went on while Keira listened politely, "but still they were cultured peoplenot like John Jacob's side of the family. They were boors!"

Keira gave a start. "You are related to John Jacob Astor?" She had heard Luc speak of this man who was also in the fur trade, a very rich,

successful man, he had said, and a "genius in business." But . . . apparently a boor.

He had worked for his cousin, Astor continued, but they'd had a difference of opinion and Freddy had quit. Now he was in very gainful employment with the North West Company and was in charge of a most important expedition. "Of course," he finished, "it's just a matter of time before I set up for myself."

The dance came to an end, and Freddy looked suddenly desperate. "Don't go," he pleaded, "please dance the next one with me. I'm sure Monsieur Duval won't mind."

Suddenly Keira didn't care whether Monsieur Duval minded or not, and she nodded, gratified to see a beaming smile transform Astor's anxious face. Oh, it was nice at least that *one* man appreciated her, Keira thought grimly. And she could hardly ask for a more courteous dancing partner than Frederick Astor, who was a gentleman in every way and knew exactly how to treat a lady.

Keira studiously avoided looking in Duval's direction, but there arose in her a strong urge to make him jealous, to taste some of the bitter medicine that *she* had had to swallow from him. So when Freddy tried to return to the subject of marriage she laughed up at him, saying, "Oh, this is a night for fun and lightheartedness. Let's not discuss anything serious."

And with that a startling change came over Keira. She decided that she was going to enjoy herself after all.

She never returned to Luc's table for the rest of the evening.

Simmering, Luc watched her from the corner of his eye. In one way he was ashamed of his behavior, especially to a woman he loved dearly. But Keira seemed to thwart him at every turn. She neither listened to what he said to her nor took his advice, even though he was the more experienced. Because of it, she had put her life in jeopardy more than once and the lives of his men too! The incident with the arctic fox cape had really been the last straw.

Several people had sat up all night making that cape for her! Wisdom himself had told him how much Keira wanted it, and Luc had immediately decided to buy it for her as a special surprise only to have that

ghastly remark thrown in his face.

The thought hit him out of the blue. Clarise would never have done that. With Clarise, his life would never be in turmoil. It would be . . . tranquil, well ordered. Neat.

In a sour mood, Luc picked up his glass and tossed down the contents.

Glowing, he watched her dancing in the arms of Freddy Astor, and right away Luc noticed the change in Keira, especially in the spirited way she danced. He glanced around and saw that others were watching her appreciative, some clapping their hands and encouraging her by calling out to Keira in the Scottish lingo.

She was chattering away to Astor a mile a minute, laughing and batting her long lashes, and Freddy, fool that he was, had the look of a besotted pup.

He felt like springing up and challenging Astor to a duel.

Snatching up a crystal decanter on the table, Luc splashed Madeira into his glass, much of it landing on the table. The music had become louder, more rollicking, fiddles, bagpipes, even drums all strumming and pounding out the beat of the various Highland tunes so dear to the hearts of the Scots. And typical of them, they had tossed aside their inhibitions and entered into the spirit of the thing with a vengeance.

Keira was born to dance that was obvious. She had grace and rhythm built into her body. Luc at first felt a stab of smug pleasure when he saw someone grab her away from Astor, who stood there with the look of a man who had received a fatal blow. But as one after another man spun Keira into their arms, whispering God knew what into her delicate ears, Luc reeled under such searing jealousy that he almost hurled the table over.

Well, he thought, two can play at that game. Scanning the room, his eyes settled on a dusky beauty in a

bright red dress. A moment later the Chippewa girl was in his arms and he was whirling her madly around the room.

Astor had no idea what to make of Luc and Keira, who had hardly glanced at each other all evening. Further, Freddy didn't *want* to think about the connection between them too much, and usually managed

to block it from his mind, mainly because it caused such a murderous rage to boil up inside him that he became ill with one of his black headaches. Once that started he was not himself at all, sometimes for days.

So he had concocted a story to explain the relationship and exonerate Keira from blame at the same time, for it was imperative that he manage to convince himself that she was innocent; necessary for his own peace of mind. There was nothing he detested more than a harlotstrange, really, when he had availed himself of their services many a time. But no, Keira MacKenzie was simply young and inexperienced, he assured himself, fresh from the green pastures of Scotland. Somehow Luc Duval had gotten control of her and *forced* the poor girl into a situation abhorrent to her. But with no one of her own to stand up for her, Keira had found it impossible to break away.

Freddy could live with that explanation. Now, watching them, he thought of a better one. There was nothing between them! They didn't give a hoot for each other, that was obvious. Perhaps, he reflected, Keira had been hired as a cook for his crew.

She had asked him for his credentials. Surely, surely that had to mean something important. It meant, Freddy told himself firmly, that she was deeply interested in him and looked to him for protection. She was asking him to rescue her from that knave, Duval!

Astor made up his mind that he wouldn't fail her.

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Keira was going over her lessons with Jasper Rawson, as she did every day, when there was a pounding at the door of her room. When she opened it to see Maurice standing there, she knew immediately that something was wrong. The voyageur was streaming sweat and red in the face, and panting so hard he could hardly speak.

"Duval," he gasped, hurrying around Keira into the room. "Where is he? He must come now! François in fight again."

Jasper threw down his quill and jumped to his feet. "Oh, surely not! Only out of jail yesterday and already"

"He drink much rum," said Maurice, and went stamping around the room poking into nook and corner. "Where Duval?" he repeated impatiently. "This time François has knife."

"Good God!" Jasper was really alarmed now and highly exasperated too. He looked questioningly at Keira, but all she could do was shake her head. She

had no idea where Luc might be. In the two days since the ball they had spoken to each other only when they had to, and he no longer slept in her room. The moment breakfast was over, each went their own way.

"You come." Maurice was back at the door, beckoning to Rawson. "He listen to you maybe, but not pay attention to us."

In the end both Keira and Jasper ran after Maurice through the gate in the fence to where a large crowd had gathered to enjoy the fight. Here voyageurs from various brigades made camp, since they weren't allowed to stay in the fort itself, and fights were far from uncommon between the different groups who all tended to brag and try to outdo each other in whatever activity they were involved in.

Keira took one look at the men brawling and hastily turned away. Both had knives, she saw, but François was clearly the aggressor. Blood gushed down his opponent's face and neck from a torn ear, and while François was chasing him around the ring the other man kept trying to leap away.

Keira had to admire Jasper Rawson then. He strode boldly into the ring shouting, "Stop that at once! Throw down these weapons" and that was as far as he got.

With a snarl, François wheeled on Jasper, whom he hated, and kicked him hard in the stomach. Rawson, gasping and clutching his middle, crumbled onto the ground.

"Oh my God!" Keira cried. "We've got to get him out of there."

She and Maurice darted into the ring and dragged the unconscious Jasper out onto the sidelines. The trouble became still more serious then as François sprang on his adversary and would have stabbed him had not two of their own crew, seeing that things were getting out of hand, finally realized that they had

better do something. They ran up behind François, knocked him down on the dusty earth, and held him there, while he yelled and struggled and called them every vile name he could think of. He had been

drinking for most of the day, then got into a card game in which he'd been accused of cheating, and the fight had begun. Bleary-eyed as he was, and almost flattened with two men sitting on top of him, François turned his head and saw Keira, and somehow the sight of her brought him back to his senses and he stopped trying to throw the others off.

Then he saw Luc Duval barging through the onlookers. "No!" he groaned inwardly, "not in front of the girl. If you do I'll kill you!"

Luc stared down at Rawson, then at François, and he roared something at him in French. The next minute he jerked the young voyageur to his feet and, grasping him by the neck, whipped him savagely across each side of his face with his hand until the youth's ears rang. Blood spattered from François's nose and lips, but worse than the pain for the voyageur was the shame, the mortification of having Keira see it. Suddenly, with a howl like an animal, François went berserk, kicking, clawing, punching at Luc while cursing him at the top of his lungs.

That's when Luc *really* hit him. With each punch he sent François sprawling in the dust, and each time he tried to rise, belted him again, and kept on belting him until finally he couldn't rise anymore. Then Luc stood over him, glaring down into his face, and told him he was fired.

Though she knew François deserved to be punished, still . . . Keira was sickened as she always was when confronted by violence. Long ago in Scotland, at the time Strathvagan sent his posse to clear them out, she had been numbed when her own people retaliated by rioting, and she hadn't been able to lift a finger to

help and had been sorry ever since. I'm too soft, she told herself as she bent over Jasper Rawson and cradled his head in her lap while Maurice hobbled off to fetch some water. Perhaps, she mused, I have an unrealistic view of the world and the people that populate it, including Luc Duval. Somehow I have to toughen myself, she sighed.

The fort guards came and bundled François away to spend another night in jail. If dangerous weapons like guns and knives weren't used in these fights, the fort authorities left the men to sort it out for themselves. But when lethal weapons were brought into it and murder was common in the Northwest then they felt compelled to take action to stop it.

Rawson regained consciousness even before they got him back to his room, and when their own Dr. Cabot couldn't be found, Luc insisted on having the resident Fort William doctor take a good look at him. The accountant begged him not to fuss. "My goodness, I'm perfectly all right," he insisted.

Fortunately, this proved to be correct, though Dr. Milton announced after examining him that Rawson had severe internal bruising and would have to spend at least the next twenty-four hours in bed. "And for a month," he warned the irritable Jasper, "no strenuous activity whatsoever. Do you understand?"

For a hen-pecked husband, little Dr. Milton could be quite a tyrant with his patients, Keira noted, and it wasn't easy to tyrannize a man like Jasper Rawson, who grumbled after the good doctor left the room, "The man is a dictator!"

Luc grinned. "Ah, but only *outside* the home. Inside it's Ellen who cracks the whip."

Keira hid a smile. "Let me fetch you a nice warm drink," she told the patient.

Once Jasper had drifted off to sleep, Keira and Luc left his room together. The corridor outside was quiet

at that time of day and there was nobody about. Suddenly, and it startled Keira, Luc wheeled on her and drew her into his arms and kissed her. She had no time to resist, to dredge up her wounded pride and bolster herself with a long string of injustices, real and imagined. The instant his warm, persuasive mouth touched hers everything else seemed inconsequential, melting like an iceberg in the sun.

They went back to their room and made fierce, ecstatic love for the rest of the afternoon. Warm and secure in Luc's arms, Keira wondered why she had ever doubted him. It seemed inconceivable to her now and she felt deeply ashamed of herself. "I *do* love the cape," she told him, "and I'm sorry for making that comment. I love the cape, the ring, and all the other things you do to spoil me but most of all and above everything, I love you! If I have you, my love, I have everything." Pushing Luc back on the bed, Keira made slow, tantalizing love to him then, cherishing every inch of his bronzed, muscular body.

They didn't spend much time in conversation that afternoon, but in

between their lovemaking a few little things came up.

"Do you know," Luc told her, "that I seriously considered challenging Astor to a duel? The fellow is completely besotted with you, and you"he pulled her earlobe"you were flirting with him outrageously, and don't deny it! I never want to catch you with Astor again." Keira saw he was serious.

Keira laughed, delighted with this show of jealousy, and teased, "He's such a gentleman, and as you say, so madly in love with me. Yes, and he wants to marry me too!" She paused here, suddenly serious herself, and examined Luc closely to see what he thought of that.

"Marriage!" he scoffed. "Our friend Astor is as changeable as the wind, one day waxing hot and the

next cold. He's about as constant as . . . as the climate in Scotland! And people who are overly courteous always make me suspicious."

Keira was to remember that remark later.

"He's also from a very rich family." She couldn't seem to stop digging at Luc, to get some sort of definite commitment out of him, even as she warned herself not to spoil things between them now that they had made up. And in fact Keira didn't care whether Astor was from a rich family or not. Rich or poor, she knew she could never love Frederick Astor.

Luc was regarding her strangely, she saw, but was unable to fathom his expression. "So it's a wealthy man you want, is it?" His tone was cooler, so much so that Keira felt a stab of fear and threw herself into his arms, crying, "No, darling, no! I was only jesting, trying to make you jealous"

"And you've succeeded!" He sounded miffed.

"Kiss me," she whispered, and when Luc went to claim her lips she said, "not there," and pointing, "here . . ."

He gazed deep in her eyes and there was a kind of triumph in his smile, an awareness of the power he had over herthe power to make her weak with desire, to make her forgive and forget, to make her yield in every way.

Keira read that look perfectly and felt a sudden fear, a sense of her

own helplessness where he was concerned, her lack of control, and a stab of anger smote her. She pushed his hand away.

"There's something I meant to ask you," she said, her mind on the hold that men could exert over women. "It's about the night of the ball, when I asked you about the relationship John McLeod had with the Indian woman. You replied in French" Keira gave him a chiding look, recalling vividly that hurtful response "and of course I didn't understand. Tell

me what you said in English?"

"What?" Luc stared at her, then laughed, blustering, "How can I possibly remember what I said now?"

There was something evasive about that reply, and Keira tugged the hair on his chest, her expression severe. "Very well, but what is the situation with McLeod and the Indian woman? You told me yourself that he had a wife in Montreal, also grown-up children. Is . . . is the Indian his mistress?"

Luc sighed, an exaggerated sigh meant to show that the present conversation bored him, but Keira ignored it, determined to learn the truth. There was something prodding her urgently at the back of her mind, a vague impression that this could be important to her, that she could learn something of great significance, and she wouldn't let it rest.

Finally he gave her a long, appraising look as if trying to estimate how well Keira would take what he was going to say.

"You've got to understand," he began, "that the life of the fur trader and the wintering partners can be harsh and lonely. You've got to experience it for yourself really before you can fully comprehend. Months and years spent in the wilds often in total isolation, with all kinds of hardships and problems to face, lack of human contact sometimes the worst of it . . ."

Keira listened impatiently, wondering when he was going to get to the point.

". . . and they have the usual emotional and biological urges clamoring away to be satisfied. It's natural enough." He gave her another probing look before going on. "So . . . many of the men form attachments to the Indian women. It's a mutual thing," Luc stressed. "There's no force

involved." Or rarely, he thought to himself. "You could say it's mutually beneficial. The men have a normal home life, and the

ladies are generally better off too in countless ways and are very happy in these relationships."

Keira tried to digest and sort out exactly what Luc was telling her. After a minute she said, "So I'm right. McLeod has an Indian mistress?"

Luc hesitated, then nodded.

"But hehe's so high up in the company!"

He smiled. "Yes, but first of all he's a man."

"Does much of this go on?"

He shifted his position on the bed, punching the pillow, rearranging the covers. "Quite a bit."

"They have seven children." Her face was grim.

"Oh . . . do they? I didn't know."

"And she's so young! God, she couldn't have been more than fourteen or fifteen at the start of their, uh . . . attachment, as you call it."

Luc got up from the bed, beautiful in his male nakedness, and walked to a wardrobe and took down a fresh set of clothes. He was tired of the conversation, Keira could see that, and probably considered, she mused, that he had satisfied her many questions. But she *wasn't* satisfied! Though Keira couldn't quite explain the feeling inside her, or what exactly she was trying to achieve with her delving and digging into the lives and morals of the fur traders, she found it difficult to just let it go, even if Luc was fed up discussing it.

Keira's whole body went cold and tense as a new question surfaced in her mind. Don't ask, she warned herself, dear God, don't ask! You might hear an answer that will devastate you.

But she *did* ask; she couldn't help it.

"Have you ever had an Indian mistress, Luc?"

"No."

"No?" Even to her own ears she sounded doubtful, skeptical.

"No!" He turned then and across the room his eyes,

even from that distance, chilled Keira. "Remember this," he said, "whatever either of us did before we met each other is our own business, and is irrelevant to our relationship."

It was François who told Keira the blunt truth.

The next day the young voyageur was released from the fort jail and he immediately sought Keira out, thinking that she would be the instrument of his revenge against Luc Duval. All night while lying in his cell François had boiled with a terrible hatred and resentment as he tried to think of a really good way to strike back. Since he was fired, he had nothing to lose, he reflected. So the following day he watched and waited, and when late that afternoon Keira emerged from the building, he finally had his chance.

It had rained earlier that day and the weather was cool and blustery, the river an oily gray and churning against its banks, the wind moaning through the spruce woods, bending the massive trees and whipping their branches to a frenzy. There was nobody on the river and all the canoes had been carefully lifted onto the banks, the ones already loaded, either for the journey back to Lachine or on to the Deep Country, covered over with oilcloth. The crews would spend the day either repairing damaged canoes and rearranging their loads, chasing up someone to write that long-overdue letter home for them or buying little gifts to take back with them to Lachine. But most, François knew from experience, would while away the time drinking and dicing, bragging about their exploits, and as often as not, fighting. With time on their hands fighting was inevitable.

"If only I hadn't gone for the knife," he thought as he skulked about Keira's building. "But if I hadn't, he would." And for Duval to dress him down in front of the girl! He wouldn't be a man, François fumed, if he

didn't seek satisfaction for that insult.

François thought nothing of it when he first ran into Freddy Astor.

"Mein Gott!" Freddy cried at the sight of François's bruised and battered face. "Did you collide with a bear, by any chance, or run into a wall?"

"I ran into my boss," the youth replied, and scowled, "though he not my boss anymore."

Astor, curious, quickly had the full story out of him. "And what will you do now?" he asked him when he'd finished.

François shrugged. "I try to get take on with another crew."

"There's no chance of Duval reconsidering?"

"Ha, him!" the voyageur snorted. "He never change his mind."

Freddy nodded, considering that for a moment. It occurred to him that he himself might have a place for François. The youth, he knew, was experienced in spite of his age. They had often run into each other in the past so François had seen much service in the wilds. There was always a need for a young, vigorous, fearless man on an expedition, especially the sort of dangerous expedition he was about to embark on the very next day, but . . . François was a troublemaker. Remembering that, Astor put the thought out of his mind.

He too was watching for Keira that day, desperate to talk to her, to try to lure her away from Luc Duval assuming she even needed luring! and persuade her to go with him when he left in the morning. En route west they would stop at Fort Chipewyan on Lake Athabasca, and there they could be married. The thought of it sent Astor's mercurial mood soaring. Oh, to have such a wife! Then, eventually, to return with her to New York and flaunt her before John Jacob, whose wife too happened to be Scottish, but nothing

like as beautiful as Keira MacKenzie. And of course by then he, Freddy, would be a celebrated success and rich into the bargain, as was bound to happen to the man with the courage and sheer fortitude to brave the Rockies, the tribes, the floods and disasters and all the rest of it while struggling to reach his goal a port on the west coast of North America. He could spit in John Jacob's face then; he could inform him, through a servant of course, that he couldn't receive him in his house, no, nor anywhere else either.

Freddy had something up his sleeve. When he *did* arrive on the west coast and had established the fort necessary before they could build a port at the mouth of the Columbia River, he would "lose" all the charts and vital information to do with the trip, thereby making sure that no one could follow the route he had carved out, a route then only known to himself, his trump card to a fortune. After that . . . well, the

rest was still a bit vague in his mind, and anyway, he told himself, he would have plenty of time to work out the next move during the expedition. Perhaps he would sell his charts to the Russians, who were as desperate as everyone else in the fur trade to establish themselves on the west coast. Or he might make a deal with the Chinese emperor. How the Chinese adored sea otter pelts! And of course furs were only a small part of the natural resources that area had to offer, as the explorer Alexander MacKenzie had discovered at the time he found the elusive North West Passage.

It often surprised Freddy that no one had followed MacKenzie's route to the Pacific. True, it had proved to be horrendously dangerous and exorbitantly expensive. Not viable, had been the general consensus afterwards. And too, from what Freddy had heard, MacKenzie himself had perhaps not been the best person to promote his route west. Following his discovery he had immediately plunged into squab-

bling and fighting with Simon McTavish, then head of the North West Company of which MacKenzie had been a director, and in the subsequent upheaval MacKenzie, knighted for his efforts, had broken away and founded a company of his own, and with that his attention had moved from exploration to the business of running a company. The search for a viable route to the west coast continued.

And he would find it! Freddy was determined about that. Standing on the shores of the Pacific Ocean with his lovely wife Keira by his side, he envisioned saying to her, gesturing at the sea spread out before them, "There is our destiny! The possibilities are as limitless as the ocean you see before you."

Impatiently he walked around the square, his eyes never leaving her building and inevitably he collided with young François.

"Who you looking for?" the voyageur asked him, frowning.

Astor shrugged. "Oh, I'm just passing the time until I have to leave tomorrow. Who are *you* looking for?"

Then the youth startled him by replying grimly, "I'm waiting to see Keira. There something she must know about Duval."

Bristling with a curiosity he could barely restrain, Astor inquired, "Can I help in some way?"

But François shook his head. "No, how can you help? This between

girl and me."

Astor made a snap decision then. "I would like to offer you a job," he announced, surprising François, "but first we must talk."

By late in the afternoon when Keira had left her room to take tea with Ellen Milton, the day had darkened to a premature twilight, though the wind had finally died down a little. She was dressed warmly in her forest-green wool skirt and matching cape, and

Luc had promised to come to fetch her from the Milton's house afterwards, once he was finished with all the arrangements necessary for their own leave-taking in two days' time. Keira had not seen much of him that day, though Luc had met her for lunch. He had seemed unusually quiet and thoughtful, a little preoccupied, but as the meal ended he said to her, "We'll have a quiet dinner by ourselves tonight and it will give us a chance to talk," almost as if he had sensed what was on her mind.

As she crossed the square in front of the main building, all of Keira's thoughts were for Luc and what they would say to each other later. All her old uncertainty had come galloping back to plague her, and she knew that if she was to have any peace at all, they must be more open and frank with each other or at least *he* must! For her part, she had nothing to hide or conceal . . .

That thought made Keira shiver a little, and she wondered why on earth that idea had popped into her mind . . . that Luc might be hiding something from her.

When François suddenly stepped into her path, Keira was startled, steeped as she had been in her own disturbing thoughts.

"I must speak to you," he said, looking very grave. "It very important."

She told him she was on her way to keep an appointment, but the voyageur persisted. Taking her arm, he drew her into a warehouse that was stacked with furs but empty of people except for a watchman, the others having gone out for their "tea."

"What on earth is it, François?" Keira inquired with a wavering smile.

He pushed open a door into a small room at the back of the building, saying, "We has to talk private."

Closing the door behind him, the voyageur turned

to her and blurted straight out, "He just use you, like the others use Indian women."

Keira stared at him blankly, unable to take the words in.

She hardly noticed the room they were in, yet, strangely, she remembered it vividly later. It was small and dusty, a bit dank, the only light that of the dour afternoon sky filtering through a tiny window. There were battered storage cabinets against one wall, and yellowing documents stacked up on a desk. On the wall directly opposite her, right behind François's head, hung a torn map, its colors long-since faded out. An air of staleness and disuse hung over the room like a shroud over a dead body. Suddenly Keira could hardly breathe.

"What . . . ?" she finally whispered.

"Duval!" François hissed, and stepped closer, his blue eyes glittering in the semidarkness. "You just his country wife. You knowhis wife"he thought a minute, trying to find the words to explain it, and with a shrug"la femme á la façon du pays. Not *real* wife."

It was as if a boulder had been dropped into a deep well. Keira jumped as the French words struck her like a blow, the very words that Luc had said to her the night of the ball, when she had questioned him about the relationship between John McLeod and the Indian woman.

François caught her arm; he was very excited when he saw her shock.

"He not stay with you," he went on. "One day he go, like they all do, and you be left behind withwith les enfants"

"No." Keira shook her head, then more forcefully, "No! You are lying, François"

His mocking laughter drowned her out. "You not want to believe, but it true." Then he said, "He got

woman in Paris. Everybody know, but they not say anything. They all, how do you say, in same boat, so they keep quiet. Her name Clarise Menard; a very fine lady. They engage and get married next year. He

build grand house for her in Montreal. *You* he leave behind in wilderness," François finished brutally.

Only the desk behind her stopped Keira from falling. She slumped against it and closed her eyes as wave after wave of searing pain sliced through her. Oh, she wanted to deny it, to scream at François to stop his hideous lies, but . . . the things he was saying made everything else fall into place, Luc placing the ring on the wrong finger, the fact that he never discussed their future together, his reticence about discussing the arrangements between the traders and Indian women. Keira knew then that it was true.

François delivered the ultimate blow.

"You just his whore," he told her.

Keira opened her mouth, but if she spoke at all it was drowned in the sudden roaring in her ears. Then François's face wavered and shifted before her and the room itself danced for a moment and then went out of focus, and the last thing she remembered was falling . . . sliding down into a great darkness, like a pit.

21

Keira woke up in a small dugout canoe of the type favored by the Indians. Although it was dark they were on the move, gliding silently down the river, keeping well in to shore to take advantage of the overhanging tree branches. When she opened her eyes, Keira lay for a moment or two gazing up at the night sky, then at the wooded banks on either side, her head reeling as she tried to figure out what was happening. Then came a great swelling of terror as she realized that her hands and feet were bound, and her first thought was that she had been found and captured by the Buzzard People.

She almost upset the canoe in her desperate efforts to get free.

"Be still!" François hissed at her, his face a pale blur in the darkness. "We do this for your own good. We save you from Duval!"

Save her from Duval?

It all came surging back into Keira's mind then, and

suddenly the fight went out of her and she lay still. "Where are you

taking me?" she asked dully.

"Away from le chien," François told her grimly. "That dog not use you no more. We rescue you, me and Herr Astor. But not talk now," he warned. "Sound carry far in wilds."

There was one moment when Keira felt like screaming her lungs out; when she felt the urge to struggle until the canoe tipped over, pitching both of them into the cold black water. Life had no meaning for her now. She had no interest in the future and she didn't want to think of the past. "Lie down!" François scolded when Keira leaned over the side of the canoe in the direction of the water, drawn to it much as her younger sister had been drawn to the release of the ocean on their way across the Atlantic. François took one hand away from the oar and shoved her back, saying, "I not able to swim, mademoiselle, and I too young to die yet. Do not worry, Herr Astor going to marry you. He take good care of you, you see."

Keira turned on her side and wept bitterly, her whole body racked with anguish, and suddenly she didn't care where they were going or what would happen to her. It made no difference now.

François paddled through the night and kept going long after they rejoined Lake Superior and a clammy gray mist hung over the lake with the coming of dawn, a mist that practically obscured them from the occasional canoe that passed them on its way to the fort. He made Keira lie down in the vessel, so that it looked as if he were alone in the canoe. At mid-morning he finally pulled into shore where a thick spruce forest came down almost to the water's edge, and there he made coffee and unwrapped a package of stale bread and hunks of cheese, handing some to Keira. She accepted the hot coffee but refused the food.

"You are in serious trouble, François," she told the young voyageur.

He laughed, nodding readily enough. "Oui. Somehow I always in trouble. But I not care!" His smile vanished and his spotty face scowled at her, his blue eyes bright with resentment. "Duval un animal. He beat me and make you into whore but he not touch us again."

Keira winced and turned away.

The young man leaned closer, eyeing Keira inquisitively. "You want marry with Herr Astor?"

"No!"

He laughed heartily, amused and at the same time gratified at her vehement reply. "Maybe we marry, eh?"

"What . . . ?" Keira's head swiveled to stare at him in horror.

François put a hand on her leg, which she instantly jerked away. He had a strong impulse to seize her and take her by force, convincing himself that he could quickly make her enjoy his amours as much as she had obviously enjoyed Duval's. She looked so beautiful and desirable to him in her dark green skirt and cape, with her bright golden-blonde hair tumbled about her shoulders and her skin so delicately pale . . . and for the first time ever they were completely alone together . . . and she was at his mercy. François shivered in delicious anticipation, his mind and body hot as he contemplated all the things he would do to her, things he had dreamed about for months. But what would become of them afterwards? He had no money at all, nor even a kit with him, no way at all of surviving in the wilds with little more than the clothes on their backs. Wait! he cautioned himself. The time will come, but that time is not now. Secretly the young Frenchman despised Freddy Astor and had no confi-

dence in him as a leader, but at the moment François recognized that he needed the German but only for the moment. "Drink your coffee," he told Keira gruffly, and reluctantly moved back from her.

Late that afternoon they met up with Astor's expedition, as arranged. For such an important exploration it was only marginally well equipped, with only two large canoes and twenty-four voyageurs to man them, most of them Iroquois Indians.

The crew were startled at the sight of Keira, and immediately began to mutter darkly among themselves.

"Hören Sie sofort damit auf!" Astor roared at them, his pale face flooding with angry color, his ever-present suspicion, the feeling that others were out to undermine him, rising to the fore. "This is no concern of yours," he shouted at them with a flourish in Keira's direction. "Attend to your own business and attend to it well," he said ominously, scowling from under his brows. "The obedient and industrious will prosper, but those who thwart me will rue the day they were born."

With that speech Freddy's expedition got off to an inauspicious start.

Astor was a totally different man with Keira. "Are you angry with me?" he asked her anxiously, his silvery eyes scanning her tight face. "I could not . . . no, it was impossible for me to stand by and do nothing while Luc Duval so ill-used you. Surely you cannot blame me for that?"

Keira didn't hide her anger. "You had no right to abduct me!"

"But . . ." he raised his hands impotently, then let them fall. "But surely you can feel nothing but revulsion at the way he was using you. You are a decent, refined lady and that swine took advantage! All I could think of I *had* to get you away from him."

"I don't wish to discuss it," Keira responded tersely.

All that day Astor watched her fretfully, and because he was worried he took it out on the men, finding fault with their rowing speed, which he thought was too slow. "Schnell!" he commanded. "Beeilen Sie sich!" When he saw that none of them understood him he sneered, "You move like turtles. The river will be frozen solid long before we reach Fort Chipewyan at the rate you are moving." He also, belatedly, took umbrage at the way the cargo had been loaded, even the fact that they didn't sing, as other voyageurs did as they worked. François observed all this and spat disgustedly over the side of the canoe, thinking, they will not long stand for this, especially the Indians.

That late afternoon when they pulled in to shore to make camp, Astor ordered François to erect Keira's tent near his own but well back from where the other men would be sleeping. Then he announced, "I will shoot any man who goes within ten feet of the woman's tent."

He came to Keira and took her hands and looked deep in her eyes. "No one will trouble you," he assured her. "They wouldn't dare! And I . . . I would never take advantage of you. I am not like Monsieur Duval," he said scornfully.

Keira sighed. "Thank you."

He still held her hands, reluctant to release her, and stammered, "Later I before we reach Fort Chipewyan where we will spend the winter, we must have a very serious discussion about our future our future together."

Keira opened her mouth to inform him that they had no future together, but suddenly she was too weary, too dispirited and depressed to risk an argument. More than anything she yearned to be by herself

in the privacy of her rent, away from Freddy watching her every move and the crew sending furtive, speculative glances her way, and François smiling at her with a knowing look in his eyes. She felt sick of it all, sick of life itself at that moment. "I'm tired," she said, pulling her hands free. "I must rest now."

"Ja," he said, his eyes searching her face. He took her hand once more and kissed it, clicking his heels, and threw back the flap of her tent. "Gute nacht," Freddy murmured politely.

"Good night," Keira mumbled, and finally, mercifully, was alone.

In the twilight François sought Freddy and asked under his breath, "How did it go when you leave Fort William?"

It had gone very well indeed. By the time Astor left the huge fort at dawn a big search was under way for Keira MacKenzie but by then François was many miles away. Every brigade leaving the fort that morning; whether for Montreal or the west, had been searched, including Astor's. "But naturally they found nothing," said Freddy, and giggled, pleased at the crafty way he'd handled things. "Duval is beside himself trying to find the girl; he has even offered a huge reward for information leading to her whereabouts. But they'll never find us now." He chuckled and rubbed his arms in glee. "And he will *never* get Keira back, that I can promise you."

The two men sat down on the lake shore and took out their pipes for a smoke. Everybody smoked in the upcountry, including the Indians who had given the white man tobacco in the first place, but now preferred the refined variety to their own rough product. Also, smoking helped to keep the hordes of troublesome insects at bay in the summertime, insects that came out in force the minute the sun went down.

Puffing furiously, François squinted out at the lake,

wishing he could feel quite as smug and confident about their plans as Freddy Astor, but then he knew Luc Duval where Astor did not. Duval could be highly dangerous when crossed, and lethal when deliberately

injured in some way. True, they had a head start on their journey west, and perhaps an extensive one if Duval remained at Fort William for several days searching for the girl, but even so, François brooded, it brought him scant comfort.

As he well knew, Duval's crew of voyageurs were top class, and Astor's were only second-rate at best. Duval's team were behind their leader one hundred percent and were prepared to risk their lives for him if necessary and already Astor's were muttering against him. There was something else; their own plans had been hastily made, their primary objective concerned with spiriting Keira away from the fort, but in soberly reviewing those plans François quickly saw the flaws in them.

He turned to Freddy and said bluntly, "I think it would be dangerous to winter at Fort Chipewyan now. Duval's depot is less than a hundred miles away"

"Rest easy," Astor interrupted. "By the time he gets there, Keira and I will be wed, and there's nothing he can do then."

François smiled thinly. "I disagree. He could kill you for kidnapping the girl, and if he make her a widow"

"I'm not afraid!" Freddy snorted, irked at François interfering with his plans, or trying to, and he felt that the time had come to make clear who was in charge of the expedition. "You have nothing to concern yourself about except doing your job," he said officiously, his expression haughty. "Everything else you will leave to me. Remember this, Duval has no idea that we have the girl in the first place, and if he should somehow find out later, well, by then Keira will be my wife."

"If she is willing to marry you," François said, an edge to his own voice now. Astor's imperious manner angered him. He had been under the impression that they were partners. Now the German was stressing that he, François, was no more than a mere servant after all in spite of the great risk François had run in sneaking the girl out of Fort William.

"Why did you say that?" Astor was frowning at him. "Why shouldn't she be willing to marry me?"

It pleased François to see that the other man was worried, and by betraying it, he handed the voyageur a weapon to use against him.

"She in love with Duval," François told him brusquely. "You should have seen her face when I tell her truth about him. Shock made her swoon."

A blotchy stain mottled Freddy's pale cheeks. "You exaggerate! What foolish rubbish! Look at her now," he blustered. "She has not made a fuss about our taking her away from him, now has she?" When François didn't reply, he scoffed, "That's because she's delighted to be free of the knave!"

The voyageur merely smiled enigmatically.

In her tent Keira lay dry-eyed and wretched, no longer able to weep. Had she not sensed all along that there was something not quite right about her relationship with Luc Duval but had stupidly tried to ignore her own instincts! Now she must pay the price in pain and humiliation, cringing to think that everybody else had known the truth of the situation all along, except her, of course. Oh God, Keira moaned inwardly, how they must have been nudging each other and whispering maliciously behind her back, secretly mocking her shameful status as Luc's "country" wife while fully aware that he would soon take an official wife who would eventually make her Keira redundant, her use at an end.

"How could he?" Keira wailed, her pride in tatters. "He swore it was *me* he loved and like a fool I believed him!"

Who was this Clarise Menard, and what was she like? Keira brooded, a hazy picture forming in her mind to torture her, that of a beautiful, cultured Parisian woman, a lady who would grace the mansion Luc would build for her in Montreal, and eventually be the mother of his children. The thought of another woman in Luc's arms made Keira tremble with jealousy and pain, but at least she would be spared the ultimate ignominy of being discarded like a worthless piece of refuse, and she had Freddy Astor to thank for that, Keira reminded herself. It soothed her pride a little to know that Astor wanted to marry her, that he at least was willing to honor her with his name. But then Freddy was a gentleman where Luc Duval was a cheat and a scoundrel!

For the next few weeks Keira was silent and withdrawn as she struggled with her pain in private, determined not to show the others how she felt and hoping that they would take her silence to mean indifference. Freddy, she noted, seemed to understand, and never once, during their carefully casual conversations, did he bring up the

name Luc Duval. Nor did he try to foist himself on her in any way, for which Keira was grateful. He continued to treat her like a refined lady and fussed over her constantly, making sure that she was comfortable in every way. Keira appreciated his concern at first, but gradually, as time passed, she began to find it irksome, though she was careful not to show it; most of all it annoyed her that his pale, lovesick eyes hardly ever left her face. She could hardly sigh or cough without him fluttering over her, crooning, patting, coddling her at every turn. "You should be grateful," Keira scolded

herself whenever irritation threatened to get the better of her. "Astor at least treats you with kindness and respect."

Problems surfaced daily as they traveled from Lake Superior to Rainy Lake, then on to Lake of the Woods and along the Winnipeg River to the lake bearing the same name. Steeped in her own misery, Keira paid little attention at first to Astor's troubles with his crew, but she did notice that they were neither as efficient nor as tractable as Duval's were and how she missed Maurice, Jasper, and all her dear voyageur friends, people she had come to think of as her clan.

It surprised her too that a man as considerate as Freddy Astor could be so harsh, dictatorial, and yes, unreasonable with his team; but then he knew them better than she did, Keira mused, and perhaps he had to be severe with them. They were certainly a surly, difficult lot, and seemed to take pleasure in causing their leader grief, so Keira didn't interfere during the many times when Astor flew into a foaming rage and on occasion beat a voyageur who had disobeyed him. "They must be ruled with an iron hand," Freddy explained to her when he saw her frowning. "You can see for yourself how ready they are to take advantage."

The weather had turned cooler and there was a crispness in the air. The smell of dry leaves and, now and then, the smoky odor of a trapper's campfire drifted to them on the breeze, a scent that ever after held a poignancy for Keira, signaling as it did the end of summer and of romance too! As they paddled down Lake Winnipeg she tried to distract herself from her own sadness by observing nature in all its lonely splendor. The deeper they went into the wilds, the greater her awareness of isolation and solitude and of her own insignificance when compared to the vastness and rich variety of the immense Northwest. Almost

daily the sky they sailed under was a cool, clean, and cloudless blue, the hills and forests aromatic with crunchy pine needles and fallen leaves, the land a pleasant mingling of shades of green, from the spruce, birch, and aspen trees, the stately poplars and towering pines, all adding their fresh colors to nature's bouquet and gradually changing their mantles as autumn advanced.

Keira found a certain peace and tranquillity in the sight of a lonesome valley hazed in warm colors of red, gold, and russet-brown, like a careless splash from an artist's palette thrown against a limitless backdrop of deep azure sky, and the flight of a flock of geese heading south; a stag drinking placidly one morning at the water's edge. The area was teeming with wildlife, jackrabbits and the playful gopher everywhere to be seen, deer, raccoon, coyote, and wolf glimpsed frequently, and once or twice, the irascible brown bear. The clean air trilled with birdsong, chickadees, bluejays, and the sweet-throated thrush adding their voices to the chorus, and at night the sudden, unnerving shriek of a hunting owl searching for his dinner.

It was a haunted land. Keira felt that quite clearly. She knew now why the Indians and many of the voyageurs, who knew the country better than most, were convinced that a powerful spirit, or spirits, ruled over a territory where man really didn't fit in and was only taken on sufferance. Even Gitche-Manitou, the good spirit, often brought harsh forces into play to eject the intruder, and when they didn't work, so the Indians claimed, then he called in his henchman, Matchi-Manitou, to rid the land of the trespasser in any way he could.

At Lake Winnipeg they began to meet bands of Ojibway and Assiniboiné Indians, the latter a branch of the Sioux from farther south. At sight of them

Freddy hastily broke out the usual gifts of knives, blankets, beads, and other items that the tribes craved so much and were not slow to demand, and in exchange an Assiniboiné brave presented Astor with a piece of disquieting news through his interpreter. There were armed white men in the area, he said.

The next afternoon as they sailed along the shore of the lake the stillness was shattered as a voice boomed out from the wooded bank, "Come ashore! Pull in or we'll blow you out of the water."

"Duval!" Astor cried, and ordered his voyageurs to paddle faster, but François wasn't so sure it was Duval. They had had few delays on their

journey west, and unless Duval had taken a light weight express canoe, there was no possibility of his catching up with them. For once he agreed with Freddy that they should try to outrun whoever was waiting to ambush them on land when a volley of gunfire erupted from the woods along the shore and their second canoe was blown to pieces, the few survivors catapulted into the icy water.

"Pull in, damn you!" the same voice roared again when the noise of the blast died down.

At that Freddy reeled from an instantaneous blinding headache. He thought he would be sick as he gazed mutely at the wreckage of his canoe floating on the water, a handful of men, not more than four or five, swimming frantically for the opposite shore. "Row on!" he screamed, incensed as he saw yet another golden opportunity slip through his fingers. "Hurry! Don't listen to them."

But his voyageurs hesitated, and it was then that François gave the order. "Ignore this madman," he said with a careless wave at Astor, "and do what they ask."

Thirty Hudson's Bay men and Seth Bratchy were waiting on the shore to greet them.

FROM THE ASHES

22

Hudson Bay
April, 1809

The Governor of York Factory remarked at dinner, "The Indian tribes have benefited by our presence here, so it has not all been one-sided. The Swampy Cree in particular are much more civilized now through contact with the fort, and it has always been our policy to deal with them fairly."

Keira, seated on his right, the only woman in the large company dining room, bristled at his complacent comment, thinking that the Indians had to be content with cheap knives, beads, and other worthless items in exchange for their furs while the Hudson's Bay Company made a fortune from the pelts at the auction rooms in London. "I think it would be nice," she said, "if a school was started for the Indians"

"A school?" The Governor stared at her in astonishment, then he laughed, "Oh no, my dear, that would be carrying things too far. It would be dangerous to try to educate these people; they are wily enough as it is. No, no"he shook his head firmly"an ignorant

savage is at least reasonably tractable. God forbid that we should muddy the waters by handing them a weapon to cause us more grief! You mean well, I daresay," he sniffed, his smile cool now, "but you lack our experience with the tribes and cannot possibly know what is best for them."

There was a heavy silence following the Governor's statement, and Keira felt that she had been soundly put in her place, but his supercilious manner annoyed her. While it was true that she lacked their long experience in dealing with the tribes, she would have to be blind not to see the many injustices perpetrated against them. Don't say anything more, Keira warned herself, thinking that they were in a difficult situation as it was. For nine long and tedious months they had been detained at York Factory, the Hudson's Bay Company's depot in the North, as much prisoners of the snow and ice as they were of the Governor of the fort. When they had first arrived on the Bay, summer was ending and they found a flat and mostly treeless tundra, an uninspiring area of swamps and stunted scrub, the nearly barren ground covered with a thin and fleeting mat of green that all too quickly gave way to unbroken whiteand they had seen nothing but endless white ever since.

As with Freddy Astor, the grinding monotony and isolation of the post was beginning to play havoc with her mind. York Factory, she quickly discovered, was a far cry from Fort William. The complex consisted of a five-acre compound of wooden buildings set up on blocks, the whole enclosed with a double row of stockade fencing, and beyond the fence stretched a barren wasteland of snow and ice where very little vegetation, even in summer, could survive.

Inside the fort the living quarters were drab and spartan, with little in the way of entertainment to

amuse the men in their off-duty hours, which Keira thought was deplorable considering all the money their London directors were making from their labors in the North. There was a large staff at York Factory and each employee was very conscious of his position within the companysomething Keira hadn't found at Fort William. Because of

it the society here was neither as stimulating nor as gay, though the majority of the people had been courteous and kind to her during her enforced stay, but the very fact that they *had* been forced to stay was a constant source of resentment for herself and Freddy Astor.

Why should she *not* speak her mind, thought Keira as they continued with the evening meal. She couldn't forget that some of these same people had blown one of their canoes out of the water on Lake Winnipeg, causing the deaths of six of their crew, and had kept them here like prisoners ever since, just because they had been engaged by the North West Company.

Glancing at the Governor at the head of the table, Keira said, "I don't need to be experienced to know that plying the natives with alcohol isn't doing what's best for them. All it does is take away their ability to bargain for the best prices for their pelts. And as for the practice of taking their women as so-called country wives, then leaving them and their mixed-blood children"

"I am married to a Cree woman," a man across the table informed Keira angrily, "and I assure you that I have no intention of leaving her behind when my tour of duty here comes to an end."

"Yes," she persisted, "but many do. What happens to these women and children then?"

"They are provided for," the Governor informed her haughtily, but didn't elaborate, and with an ostentatious glance at the heavy gold watch stretched across

his portly stomach he abruptly brought the dinner to an end. With a curt nod to Keira he strode out of the room.

"We have to get out of this white tomb!" Freddy Astor cried agitatedly when they returned to their own quarters following the meal. "These people could keep us here forever until we become as petrified and dead as that miserable landscape out there." He waved to the window, where Keira was watching Eskimos bringing their pelts into the fort by dogsled. Astor paced about the room behind her. Over the past few weeks he had become more and more overwrought. "They are liars and cheats," he said, his voice rising, "but I know their game. They aim to keep us here until their own expedition to the Pacific can get off to a good start"

"You have only yourself to blame for that," Keira snapped.

She had been shocked when Astor, shortly after they were brought to York Factory, had tried to make a deal with the Governor, offering to sell him his charts to the Pacific for a substantial fee, plus the return of their canoe and equipment, which had been confiscated at the time they were ambushed. After consideration, the Bay officials had agreed and Freddy had handed over his projected route to the west coast, but the Governor was so slow to uphold his part of the bargain that in the end Astor had lost his head and tried to attack him, an incident that resulted in Freddy spending two months in the fort jail.

While he was incarcerated, François and their remaining voyageurs defected. The day before he left York Factory, the young Frenchman told Keira, "I'd sooner follow wild goose than Herr Astor and you mad if you stay with him." Then he tried to coax Keira to leave with him, even offering to return her to Fort William if she so desired. But Keira declined. By

then she distrusted François about as much as she did Freddy, though for different reasons, and François went off after telling her that she was a fool. "Even Duval better than the German," he sneered, "but you find out soon enough."

She had already found out. Freddy, she knew now, was treacherous and self-serving and far from dependable. His erratic behavior and violent temper hardly inspired confidence in her, so now, when Keira heard him outlining a plan whereby they could escape from York Factory, she was more than slightly dubious, especially when that plan involved Seth Bratchy. Keira had noticed that Astor had become quite chummy with Bratchy over the past few months. The trapper knew the area they were in well, since he spent much of his time in the north hunting and trapping with the Eskimos. She had found out that he had a native wife and several mixed-blood children but that didn't stop him from leering at Keira each time she had the misfortune to run into him, something she tried hard to avoid.

"I don't trust Seth Bratchy," Keira said when Astor finished. "And I wouldn't go to the length of the fort gate with the man. Try to have patience and hold out a little longer," she advised. "Once some of this ice melts and the waterways reopen the Bay people will have to let us go. They can't keep us here forever."

Keira had her back to him as she stood at the window and she didn't see the way his eyes narrowed suspiciously as Astor looked her up and down. "Perhaps you like it here," he suggested, his voice deceptively

quiet. "The only woman among all these adoring men. Ja, why should you go?" he taunted. "You have plenty to amuse you at York Factory, plenty of variety"

"Stop it, Freddy," Keira broke in wearily, recalling Luc's comment about being suspicious of people who

were overly courteousnot that Freddy was so courteous now! In the nine months they had been held at the fort their relationship had deteriorated badly, particularly following her "illness" shortly after they arrived. The exact nature of that illnessas the fort surgeon so delicately called it had been discovered by Seth Bratchy through the Eskimo woman who had cared for Keira during her long convalescence. Visiting Astor it the time he was in jail, the trapper took pleasure in informing Freddy, "The wench miscarried Duval's brat."

The German had let out a keening cry like that of a mortally wounded animal. Then it was true, he moaned inwardly, Keira had been a willing partner to Duval all along! At that his carefully drawn picture of his beautiful Madonna was debased, and Freddy shook with a terrible anger. YetGod help him!he still wanted her, though in a different way now. Nor would he leave Hudson Bay without her.

"Then you won't come with me?" he said, testing her to be sure.

Keira shook her head. "My intention, once they let me go, is to return to Montreal where I hope to find a job. I'm sorry, Freddy."

"Ja, you *will* be sorry!" he shouted, and banged out of the room.

Two days later Keira was roused in the middle of the night with sounds of movement in her room. She jolted up in bed, her heart thudding, only to be knocked back against the pillows and an oily-smelling rag thrust in her mouth. Then her wrists and ankles were tied securely. With the heavy shutters closed at the window, the room was in pitch darkness, but Keira knew her assailant *had* to be Freddy Astor, recalling how he had threatened her just two days before. The man was insane! To think that he would dare attack her when they were both prisoners inside

York Factory, she thought in amazement. Surely he must realize that he couldn't escape punishmentthen she remembered how he'd attacked the Governor himself several months before. He was mad!

She almost choked on her gag when her bedgown was thrown up above her hips and a rough, groping hand began to touch her intimately, kneading her breasts, her buttocks, then forcing its way between her legs.

"Lie still!" a muffled voice ordered when Keira struggled frantically. "Let me give you a taste of things to come. Like that?" he chuckled, a finger stabbing inside her. "Good, isn't it? But not as good as this" Grabbing her hand, he leaned closer and thrust it over the bulge at his thighs, saying thickly, "Wish we had time now, but don't worry, we'll have lots of it shortly."

Then he said, "The wolf always gets his prey in the end, even when he has to track the wilderness to catch up with it." He leaned closer still, chuckling. "You remember what I told you at the sale in Montreal, to enjoy the Frenchman while you had the chance; that it wouldn't last long? Now you know I meant it."

Keira felt a jolting chill. It was Seth Bratchy! And Bratchy, as she knew, was free to come and go from this place at will.

Minutes later they left York Factory by dogsled, with Bratchy and his Eskimo wife seated up front where the sleepy guard could see them, and Keira and Astor hidden under a thick pile of rugs in back. Beyond the gate there was nothing but a tractless ocean of white stretching before them, the only sound the icy hissing of the sled runners cutting through the snow and the huffing and puffing of the dogs carrying them swiftly into an arctic wilderness of searing cold.

23

"Gone," the chief factor said grimly when Luc and six of his best men arrived at Hudson Bay three days later. "They dined with us as usual that evening and gave no sign of anything afoot, but in the morning both Astor and Miss MacKenzie had vanished."

It was a bitter moment for Luc, the culmination of a massive search that had taken him from Fort William on Lake Superior all the way west to the foothills of the Rocky Mountains and nearly the entire way back again, a distance of almost three thousand miles only to fail in the end.

But at least he knew one thing for certain now. Keira was definitely with Freddy Astor. That much was no longer mere speculation.

The search for Keira had been the most grueling, dangerous, and frustrating journey Luc had ever undertaken, sometimes traveling by express canoe, hoping to make up lost time. At other times he had traveled by horseback, and latterly, once the snows

came, by dogsled. He had long since lost track of the number of Indians he had questioned along the way, and the forts he had visited hoping for information that would point him in the right direction. He'd had few clues to go on, other than the fact that François had been released from the Fort William jail on the day Keira disappeared, and François was known to harbor a grudge against him. It was significant, Luc had thought at the time, that the young voyageur had vanished from the fort on the same day as Keira. Luc was convinced then that he had abducted Keira to get his revenge, thinking it the best possible way of striking back at him.

The first thing they did was to check to see if any canoes had been stolen, since François could hardly take Keira away on foot through such rugged terrain, nor could he have afforded to purchase his own canoe or the weapons and provisions he would have needed before venturing out into the wilderness. When nobody reported a stolen vessel, Luc surmised that François must be lurking somewhere in the vicinity of the fort. With the help of the North West people, they spent close to three days combing through every building and camp before branching out along the lake shore and into the surrounding woods, only to come up empty-handed.

Then one of the store clerks came forward with a piece of interesting information. "This probably doesn't mean anything," he began, "but my shop faces the main square and you can't help but see everything that goes on out there, especially when you aren't busy." He had been smoking by the window, he went on, when he saw Freddy Astor deep in conversation with François. "It surprised me at the time," he went on, "because Astor struck me as being too uppity to have anything to do with the likes of François Messenger. But they seemed very friendly. And later,

when I heard that François was implicated in Miss MacKenzie's disappearance, well . . . I thought I should mention it."

As soon as the clerk mentioned Freddy Astor, Luc knew that François had found a way out of Fort William. Within minutes he learned from John McLeod about Astor's expedition to the west coast, and the next

morning Luc set out after them in an express canoe, hoping to catch up. But four days had already been lost in concentrating the search around the fort.

Weeks later, west of Athabasca Country, Luc's party encountered a band of Blackfoot Indians who assured Luc that no white men had passed through their territory. They would have known if they had, the Blackfeet said, because their braves had been on the warpath with their enemies, the Assiniboinés, for several months and had investigated every campfire, every canoe passing on the river, and tracked the slightest sign of human passage through the forests. "No white men at all," they declared firmly. When the Assiniboinés themselves collaborated this later, Luc had to turn back and retrace his steps by this time through deep snow shoring up his flagging spirits by telling himself that Keira might have already been found. She might even be waiting for him when he returned to Fort William!

By then they were almost out of food, and with winter upon them no game could be found. They were close to the starvation point when they reached Lake Winnipeg and an Ojibway village on its shores, where they paused to barter some of their weapons in exchange for food. They spoke to several young men of the village who told them about witnessing a battle between white men on the lake late the previous summer. One group of white men, they maintained, came from the territory of the Swampy Cree in the north. They could tell this from the fact that several

Cree had been with them to man their canoes, and the canoes themselves were painted with the totem of what they called "the white men of the north bay" who traded with the Cree for furs.

"They must mean the Hudson Bay people," Luc's interpreter translated for him.

The men of the bay, the Indian went on, had captured the other group. Then he said through the interpreter, "The group with the white woman."

Exhausted and half-starved as they were by then, Luc set out the next morning for Hudson Bay with six of his fittest men and a store of dried geese and ptarmigan and a sack of meal provided by the Ojibway. The trip north over deep snow proved horrendous, especially as they were hounded for a good part of the journey by ravenous wolves, persistent creatures that forced them to use up most of their ammunition. But

neither wolves, snow, nor anything else could have induced Luc to turn back and wait for more favorable weather conditions. Everything pointed to Keira being with François and Freddy Astor, and Luc wasn't sure which of these two men posed the greatest threat to her. All he knew was that he wouldn't rest until he had the woman he loved back safe and sound in his arms, never to be parted from him again.

"How would they have gotten away?" Luc asked the chief factor. "They certainly couldn't have walked away on foot. Have any of your sleds been stolen?"

Smith slowly shook his head.

"Then they had a collaborator here at the fort!"

"Yes," said Smith, "I'm afraid so. We've come to the conclusion that they were assisted by Seth Bratchy, a trapper who often brings his furs to the factory. Astor and Bratchy have become friendly over the past months, and the trapper has entrenched himself with the Eskimos, so we estimate that they

must be heading for the Eskimo settlement up near the Chesterfield area, though"he broke off, rubbing at his chin"what we *don't* understand is why Bratchy would risk incurring our wrath by helping Astor. He has nothing to him by doing so."

Luc could have contradicted him, but he kept his thoughts to himself.

It was three o'clock in the morningand the sun was shining! Keira knelt beside the flap of the tent and gazed out at the strangest land she could ever imagine in her wildest dreams, in some ways a land of fairy tale magic, but as in most fairy tales, there was a dark side too. The scenery beyond the tent was all dazzling bright and clean, and in the strange crystalline air it was possible to see for endless miles so that the mountains that seemed quite close now could really have been far away; it was impossible to tell.

Freddy had told her that they were near the Arctic Circle, in Eskimo country. Late the previous day the white tundra had given way to glassy-blue mountains of ice, and in the snow indigo patches of water appeared where seals popped up to take a look at this curious world and gulp air before once again sinking down into the black water. Icebergs in fantastic shapes radiated flashes of color so brilliant they hurt the eyespolar green, deep jade, electric blue, and a blushing rose in the ever-present sunlight. Here the wind had a glassy ring.

Sweeping across the tundra, it carried millions of tiny ice crystals before it, the larger ones flashing like diamonds against the vibrant blue of the sky. Many species of gulls soared overhead, and the black-and-white eider duck, kittiwakes, guillemots, and countless other birds that Freddy couldn't identify.

The cold was brutal. Even wearing five layers of padded and fur-lined clothes supplied by Soolah,

Bratchy's wife, Keira still felt chilled, her feet and legs perpetually numb inside her borrowed kamiks, knee-high boots made out of sealskin. And her face, peeping out of her hood lined and trimmed with wolf fur, was red and wind-burned.

Keira felt sorry for the sled dogs piled up close together for warmth on the ice outside, though Freddy assured her they were used to it. Inside their tiny caribou-skin tent with its crude stove and chimney rising through a hole in the roof, it was scarcely much warmer. Here the humans, too, lay close together for warmth on top of a heap of skins and furs, and the nearness to Seth Bratchy, who somehow always managed to creep near Keira in the course of the night, was enough to drive all thoughts of sleep from her mind.

They had been traveling north for five days now and during the last two Keira had noticed a tenseness between Freddy and Seth Bratchy and the reason was obvious. Though the trapper's wife was right there with them, Bratchy ogled Keira with increasing boldness, and the comments he made, less subtle and careful the further north they went, had aroused Astor's ever-simmering suspicion and jealousy, leading to harsh words between the two men the previous day.

Soolah, Bratchy's long-suffering wife, knew well what was going on. Keira was convinced of it. But there seemed to be nothing Soolah could do except pretend it wasn't happening. Her attitude was stoic and aloof, as if she had mentally removed herself from the nuances and innuendoes, the growing tension between, the other three, and had decided to let them sort it out however they could.

Soolah spoke very little English. She seemed quite old to Keira, near to middle-age, though from her time at York Factory Keira had discovered that it was

very difficult to gauge the ages of the Eskimos with their small, compact stature and unlined reddish-brown faces. The day after

Bratchy had kidnapped her in collusion with Astor! Keira had tried to appeal to Soolah to help her escape, but all the woman had done was shrug fatalistically as if to say, "There's nothing I can do." But ever since, Keira had noted, Soolah took great pains never to look her straight in the eye.

Kneeling at the tent flap, the middle-of-the-night sun in her face, Keira felt a desperation so intense that for a second she was tempted to slip away while the others slept and take her chances on the frozen tundra. Of course she knew well enough that she wouldn't have lasted more than an hour or two in the icy wastes, but at that moment a quick death seemed preferable to living with a constant, clutching dread in her heart, wondering what was going to happen to her. The atmosphere between them was rapidly assuming an explosive pitch. At any moment, she sensed, violence would erupt. The two men had almost come to blows the day before, with Freddy shouting, "Stop staring at her! And watch your tongue. Keira is *my* woman. You attend to the one you already have."

Bratchy had just laughed, and watching him laugh made Keira's skin crawl, the scars on his face puckering into a ghastly caricature of mirth, more like a sneer, no longer attempting to conceal the contempt he felt for Freddy Astor. Keira knew then, with a lurching horror, that the trapper had befriended Astor just to get at her! She felt that he was biding his time before making his move; that he'd wait until they were deep into the tractless polar regions and far beyond the reach of white authority then he would strike!

They wouldn't stand a chance. Even at this very moment, Keira thought gloomily, they were almost

completely at his mercy. Bratchy owned the sled and the dogs, the tent and all the equipment; he even provided the food that sustained them during the trip. Whether Astor had contributed to any of it Keira couldn't be sure. She was so livid at Freddy for taking her away by force from York Factory that she spoke to him only when absolutely necessary, so she knew nothing about the financial arrangements between the two men or what sort of deal they had made.

Freddy Astor had some money, that much she knew. True enough, the Bay people had confiscated his canoe and provisions his means of escape but they had left him with his money pouch once they discovered that his funds had been greatly depleted by then anyway. And cash had little value in the wilderness.

Freddy had come away from the factory with his gun and several knives not that it mattered. Bratchy, Keira had noticed, was very well armed, and *he* was the one in command. To be able to survive and follow tracks in the Arctic took very special skills and years of experience, and Freddy possessed neither. The trapper Bratchy held their lives in the palm of his hand.

That thought sent Keira crawling out of the tent. Instantly her flesh crinkled in the numbing cold in spite of the bulky layers of clothing she wore. The sun was low on the horizon, sending slanting rays of silver sparkling across the ice and turning the snowy landscape a delicate shade of rose-pink, the scene about her strange and awesomely beautiful, the silence profound.

Tethered about fifty feet away from the tent, several of the handsome silver-and-black Siberian sled dogs lifted their shaggy heads, their slanting eyes watching Keira intently. Rough and cruel as he could be with everything else, Bratchy treated his dogs with kind-

ness and respect, as well he might since so often his life depended on them. The trapper never allowed anyone, not even Soolah, to touch his huskies or feed them as much as a scrap, and he, was proud that most of them were quite vicious, especially with strangers, who approached them at their peril.

As she looked at the animals, a wild idea flashed into Keira's mind, an idea that thawed her frozen blood and sent it pumping madly through her veins. The dogs were still in their harnesses, as Bratchy wanted an early start in the morning, though for comfort he had detached them from the sled itself.

All she had to do, Keira thought feverishly, was hitch the traces to the vehicle, jump in, and pick up the reins. There was a good chance that the huskies wouldn't move for her, she knew that quite well, but she was fully prepared to take the risk. Surely that one chance, she told herself, was preferable to walking helplessly out into the snow to an icy death.

Very cautiously, with a nervous glance over her shoulder at the tent, Keira moved silently over the snow to the dog team. The huskies were all staring at her now, their pale, almond-shaped eyes alert, ears pricked high, one or two beginning to wag their tails. Good! she thought, at least some of them seemed friendly, though the lead dog, Stryker, was standing stiff as a board, the shackles slowly rising across

his back. Telling herself that the huskies had had five days to get to know her a little and surely wouldn't *think* of biting her, Keira got to within six feet of them and raised a trembling hand, whispering, "Good doggies. Be quiet, now . . . don't, please don't, give me away."

Stryker's lips curled back from gleaming white fangs and a low growl rumbled up from his throat and at that the swishing tails instantly stilled around him.

"Go ahead. Try to touch them," Bratchy said

behind her, "though I don't think you would look very pretty minus a hand."

Keira gave a start and threw a wild look over her shoulder to find the trapper standing smiling at her outside the door of the tent. She ran then, dashing blindly across the snow, not caring where she was going, her only hope to be given the chance to die in peace. Hampered by her bulky clothes and the cumbersome kamiks, she flew in the direction of what looked to be massive rocks but might well be icebergs floating at the edge of the bay; there was no way of telling for certain. Clambering and slipping over a ridge of ice, Keira slid down an embankment and into the shelter of the rocks, narrowly missing a black hole in the snow-covered ground filled with frigid water.

Bratchy caught up with her easily. Laughing, his face gruesome in the harsh light, he pulled her into his arms and looked down into her terrified eyes. "Tomorrow," he said, "we'll get to the settlement. I think we'll leave Soolah and Astor there, what do you say? It's time you and me had a little privacy, a chance to get to know each other, as it were." He laughed and, still holding her firmly, ran the back of his hand down her cheek. "Such soft skin," he murmured. "Makes me want to see all of it. You might not know this, but inside an igloo, with the fire blazing up, it's warm as toast. You'll see for yourself late tomorrow at my fishing spot north of the settlement." He held her back at arm's length, his good eye moving over her padded clothing, and went on throatily, "We can peel all this stuff off you then, right down to that silkysoft skin . . . naked and hot and all cozy inside the igloo"

"Keira! Bratchy!"

The dogs were barking furiously, and Keira and Bratchy could hear the thumping and crunching of Astor's boots as he followed their tracks over the snow. Bratchy wasn't perturbed. He continued to hold

her, thrusting his body hard against hers. "Remember the night in your room, the night I kidnapped you? You haven't forgotten what I did to, you, have you?" When she didn't reply, in fact was too paralyzed with fear to utter a sound, he added thickly, "No, I can tell you remember that well, the way I put my hand up between your legs and teased you with my finger. You liked that. Sure you did." He ran the tip of his tongue slowly over his lips suggestively, his eye on her mouth. "Remember I made you feel it, what I have for you? I'll get you all hot and sweaty and"

"Get your hands off her!" Astor threw himself over the ridge behind them and slid down the slope, sprang back to his feet, and there was a gun in his hand as he advanced on them, his face mottled with fury. "Dog!" he shouted at the trapper. "Filthy, rutting dog! Let her alone." He motioned with his free hand. "Stand back from him, Keira. I'll rid us of this scum."

Bratchy's grip tightened on her and he turned in such a way as to use Keira as a shield, but there was no fear in his voice as he said, "I came after the girl because she was trying to escape"

"Liar! Liar!" Astor screamed, and again motioned Keira back, though it was impossible for her to move.

"Get a grip on yourself, you fool." Bratchy was beginning to get angry. "How far do you think you'll get in this wilderness without me? The dogs won't move for you, that I can assure you, and you'd last about an hour on foot. The girl was trying to escape, I tell you!" he bellowed. "Ask her yourself if you don't believe me."

Freddy walked to within three feet of them, his pale eyes riveted on Keira's face. "Is that true?"

Before she could reply, Bratchy lashed out with his foot and kicked the gun out of Freddy's hand. Then, while Keira stumbled back screaming, he began to beat Astor so viciously that Keira was sure he would

kill him, and when Astor was unconscious the trapper dragged him to the black hole in the ice and would have dropped him through if Keira hadn't clutched at him frantically, pleading with him to spare his life. Even then Bratchy ignored her until she shrieked. "Then you had better kill me too since I'm a witness to this murder, and one day, I swear to you, the world will know about it."

He laughed at her. "And how will they know? You'll never get free of me."

But Soolah suddenly appeared on the ridge above them calling sharply to the trapper in her own language. Bratchy glowered at her and snapped back, but instead of shoving Astor through the hole as he'd intended, he roughly dragged him back to camp, dumping him in a heap outside the tent.

An hour later they were again on the move, with Freddy still unconscious and trussed up like an animal in the back of the sled, Keira squatting beside him trying to revive him, Soolah stoical once more seated beside her "husband" at the front of the vehicle. Cracking the whip over the backs of the huskies without actually touching them, Bratchy glanced over his shoulder to where Keira crouched in a bed of furs. "Well," he smirked, "this is the last lap of the journey. By tonight we'll reach the village. And tomorrow" he paused "tomorrow you and I have some plans of our own."

Keira shuddered and made no response. Long ago, she remembered, Luc had tried to warn her about Bratchy. Luc . . . a terrible fierce yearning took hold of her, a wrenching twist of her heart that caused her to double up with pain as waves of hopeless anguish coursed through her body. If she died now, or tomorrow and Keira made up her mind to kill herself if Seth Bratchy kept his promise and defiled her she would go to her death with the knowledge

that the man she loved, a man she had grown to trust and respect with all her heart, had tricked her. It was a bitter thought.

They stood around in the snow and watched the Indian tracker examine the long-dead campsite, Luc and Maurice and Clemson, the Hudson's Bay man, stamping their feet in a futile effort to bring the circulation back to their numb toes. All four of them were bundled up like Eskimos, clad in many layers of warm clothing, several pairs of sox, underboots and knee-high kamiks and they were still cold.

Finally the Indian, an expert tracker for the Hudson's Bay Company, straightened up and turned to Luc. "I think they stop here yesterday," he said, adding, "We be lucky so far. No wind." Lifting his brown face to the sky, he sniffed for a moment or two, and sighed. "But she come. She in the air." Lifting his gloved hand he pointed north. "By tonight, maybe late afternoon, she roar down from the green land and sweep all track away, then they be difficult to follow."

Glumly they got back in the sled, a sleek new vehicle lent to Duval by the Hudson's Bay Company since his own was in such bad shape by the time he had reached York Factory that it couldn't be taken further until repaired. And he had no time to waste! Pulling the sled were twelve young huskies in their prime, the lead dog, as was usually the case, slightly older and more experienced. They were well provisioned for the search, and well armed too. But still, Luc knew only too well that none of it guaranteed success in the icy white wasteland stretching before them to the horizon, where many a larger and even better-equipped team had perished without trace. The killing cold was only one of countless hazards. Even more treacherous were shifting ice floes, one moment attached to the land, the next drifting in the sea,

stranding any living creatures with the misfortune to be on it and exposing them to frigid spray that instantly froze over them, encasing them in a tomb of ice. Many a sled too, moving over what seemed to be hard-packed snow, had vanished into oblivion when that snow was found to cover a yawning ravine or a hole in the ice, or when old, decaying ice itself cracked and crumbled beneath it, pitching sled, dogs, and men into fathoms of black water.

Several times, as they journeyed on, they saw the skeletons of seals, wolves, birds, and once a small whale, their bones silvery-white and scoured clean with not a shred of meat or skin left on them, the victims either of Eskimo hunters, who generally made use of every inch of the creatures they caught, or of other predators, among them the polar bear. The sleek, bullet-shaped heads of seals popped up inquisitively through their breathing holes, or lay sprawled comfortably in social groups on the ice, oblivious to the fifty-degrees-below-zero temperature. Whales rose majestically and for short, breathtaking moments coasted down long channels in the ice, and herds of caribou appeared suddenly, like ghosts, in the inland valleys, only to vanish as abruptly as they had appeared.

Gazing about at bizarre ice sculptures, frozen waterfalls, and tiny infant icebergs floating like diamonds against a bed of blue-black water, Luc could take no pleasure in the dazzling and wonderful sights around him, not when his heart was so dark and filled with foreboding. The thought of Keira in the clutches of Seth Bratchy was driving him insane.

The Hudson's Bay Company had been surprisingly fair with him, for all that they knew of his connection to the North West Company. Most of Luc's voyageurs had had to stay behind, for speed was imperative

and the lighter the load, the faster the sled could travel.

Smith had generously donated the services of their best tracker at the factory, a man who knew the Northern regions well, and other than requesting that one of their officers, Peter Clemson, go with him, they had placed no restrictions on Luc.

As he listened to the glassy whine of the sled runners cutting through the snow, Luc's mind went back to the year he had set up his fort in Athabasca. It had taken him time and many gifts before he managed to win over the local Indians, but by the end of that first year he had made a friend of Lovaka, a Chipewyan chief. Lovaka had many children by his several wives, among them two beautiful daughters. One day he appeared at Fort Arrowhead with the eldest, Sweetwater, and insisted on making a present of her to "white man with no woman." When Luc tactfully declined, explaining that it wasn't the custom in his country to make gifts of human beings, Lovaka reminded Luc through the interpreter that they weren't *in* his country now but in Lovaka's, and here Chipewyan customs must prevail. Reluctant to insult the chief, Luc agreed that Sweetwater could remain at Fort Arrowhead as his housekeeper-cum-cook.

Among the trappers who sometimes stopped at his fort was Seth Bratchy, and Bratchy had taken a powerful fancy to the dark-eyed Indian beauty. One day Sweetwater had come to Luc complaining that Bratchy had made advances to her, and Luc forthwith threw him out, warning him never to come near the place again. But shortly afterwards, while Luc was away visiting Fort Chipewyan, a North West installation on Lake Athabasca, Bratchy had slipped back into Luc's fort and kidnapped Sweetwater, severely wounding one of the guards who tried to apprehend him on the way out. Fortunately, Luc's employee lived to name the culprit.

A month later the girl's battered and defiled body was found by traders near Methy Portage. When the Chipewyans heard about it they immediately sought revenge. They eventually caught up with Bratchy on the Saskatchewan River and brought him back to their main village to be executed for his crime. At first the trapper tried to bluff his way out of it, swearing that he hadn't been near Fort Arrowhead at the time of the kidnapping, but Chief Lovaka wouldn't listen. "Duval say it was you."

Then, in their own diabolical way, the Chipewyans had set about

making Bratchy admit it, making him suffer as his innocent victim had suffered, but they stopped short of killing him. Observing his handiwork, Chief Lovaka decided that the best punishment of all would be to allow him to live to see, ever after, nothing but horror on the faces of people who gazed upon him, especially women.

Now, as Luc remembered some of the things Bratchy had done to Sweetwater, his blood ran cold. As the afternoon wore on and the wind got up, making the loose snow swirl around them in short gusts at first, then as it increased, in a perpetual whirlwind of white, his spirits sank to his boots. They could hardly see five feet in front of them; it was madness to go on. It wouldn't help Keira, Luc reasoned gloomily, if they plunged through a hole in the ice or into a snow-filled ravine.

"Halt the team!" Luc reluctantly called to the driver, his only consolation the thought that Bratchy, somewhere up ahead, would be forced to stop too, unless, of course, he had already reached his destination.

24

"Stand fast, Stryker!"

Bratchy carefully inspected the lead dog's feet, then replaced his leather stockings and tied them firmly in place with reindeer sinew. Every husky had been examined, and their paws, while not actually cut and bleeding, were swollen and inflamed.

The trapper straightened up and stood for a moment chewing his lip, debating whether it was prudent to continue the journey or pitch the tent and wait for the storm to die down. Soolah watched him in silence. She never voiced her opinion unless asked for it, knowing from experience that Bratchy rarely cared about what she thought.

The wind shrieked down from the north and the world billowed white about them, the cold so intense that Keira, almost smothered under a pile of fur-lined rugs, still felt numb to the bone. Beside her in the back of the komatik Freddy lay tossing and turning and muttering incoherently, in German, now and then

struggling against his bonds, so that Keira had to push him down lest he dislodge their covers. She was terrified that they would be whipped away by the wind, certain that if that happened they'd quickly freeze

to death.

After a moment's cogitation, Bratchy decided to forge ahead, though he realized the going would be slow. He climbed back into the front of the vehicle, settled himself down beside Soolah, and picked up the reins. "Heave ho!" he yelled to the dogs, and they lurched forward wearily. He turned them away from the land where the snow lay thick and soft and steered the komatik out onto the frozen bay where most of the recent snow had been blown away, or turned into ice. Both he and the huskies knew exactly where they were going in spite of the poor visibility, though the route he was forced to take was much longer and more circuitous. As he'd anticipated, their progress was slow. The dogs had been pulling the sled steadily for days now and were no longer fresh and vigorous. It was strenuous work for the six animals to pull a sled carrying four people, plus equipment and supplies, against a howling headwind. Bratchy made up his mind to purchase six more huskies at the first opportunity; at the moment, he thought with a smile, he was quite flush with coin and soon would be flusher still.

"Please lie still!" Keira hissed near Astor's ear. "If we lose these rugs . . ." Pushing at him, she encountered something hard near his waist just under his outer jacket and suddenly remembered the eight-inch hunting knife he always kept at his belt. After a few fumbling moments Keira managed to transfer the weapon from his belt to hers, and when that was done her flagging spirits took an upward leap. It was almost like having her trusty dirk back again. She had never really felt properly dressed without it.

Well, she thought to herself as she burrowed back

down in the rugs, I am not quite finished yet! She hadn't survived this long to give up without a fight now. Peeping out again through a slit in her hood trimmed with wolf fur, her eyes fixed on Bratchy's broad back, and she tried to envision herself plunging the knife between his shoulder blades. Would she be able to do it? In all the years she had carried her dirk about with her in Scotland she had never once used it to hurt a living thing; she had kept it for security more than anything else. Only Lord Mathew had felt the fiery sting of it but then she didn't consider *him* to be human. He was lower than any animal that had ever crossed her path, and so was Seth Bratchy!

Keira ducked back under the covers and closed her eyes, wondering, as she often did, why everything she loved was always taken away

from her family, Luc Duval, even their baby. Even though she knew now that Luc had never truly loved her, still she had wanted his child; wanted it desperately. Losing the baby had almost finished her. Once more she had been left with nothing . . . nothing but bitter sweet memories.

Yet, for some reason Keira couldn't fathom, there still lurked in her an urge to live, and it was only in rare moments that she lapsed into self-pity when she would weep and bemoan her lot in life. These times usually ended with her scolding herself, reminding herself that so many others had things much worse. If she survived this and somehow managed to get free, Keira promised herself, she would spend the rest of her life trying to help these unfortunates. Perhaps, she mused, that was her true role in life.

It was six o'clock the following morning when they finally arrived at the small Eskimo settlement of Helsingor. By then the storm had died away and the eternal northern sun was shining brightly once more. Helsingor, Keira saw, was little more than a huddle of

igloos tucked into an inlet on the bay. Besides the snow houses there were three battered wooden shacks, two used for storage and the third a sort of village store. Early as it was, at least half the population of fifty-five people turned out to greet them.

It was immediately obvious to Keira that Seth Bratchy was an important man in the village, whether because they were afraid of him and the image he projected of white authority, or because he craftily supplied them with liquor and other things they craved, she couldn't tell, but they all behaved in a subservient manner as Bratchy proceeded to dole out the kegs of rum and cheap whisky while at the same time barking out orders. Within half an hour of their arrival Keira and Astor were ensconced in an igloo in which a whale-oil stove was burning. The heat was terrific, especially after the frigid cold outside. Except for the home-made stove with its smoke stack rising through the roof, the igloo was almost bare. There were a couple of stools and a low crude table made of whalebone and a pile of musty-smelling skins heaped up in one corner, and that was the extent of the furnishings in the Arctic guest house.

Bratchy, eager to be off to attend to his dogs, many of whom by now were limping badly and ravenous for something to eat, stuck his head in the doorway to warn them, "If you leave this house, I've given orders for you to be shot."

Keira glared at him but made no reply. Astor, sprawled on the rugs, was in no shape to go anywhere. The trapper looked at them for a moment, and laughed, then with a mocking salute disappeared.

Later, Soolah, as silent as ever, brought them a meal of boiled seal meat. Pointing to Freddy, still only semiconscious and shockingly pale, Keira said, "He can't eat that meat. What he wants is soup." To demonstrate, she cupped her hands to her mouth and

made loud slurping noises, and after a moment Soolah smiled and nodded, seeming to understand. Shortly she returned to their igloo with a steaming bowl of broth, which Keira attempted to feed to Astor, though much of the soup ended up dripping from his chin to his jacket, there to leave a widening, greasy stain. His face was terribly battered, one eye puffed closed, his lip split and the blood about his mouth frozen, though it rapidly began to melt in the heat in the room. "Freddy," Keira whispered, "try to wake up. We must decide what to do. Freddy!" She raised his head a little, but when he opened his eyes they were staring and blank. Keira could tell that he didn't recognize her, and a chill ran through her with the knowledge that Astor would be no help to her at all, and that she was entirely on her own to deal with things as best she could.

When the soup was finished, Keira settled Freddy back against the rugs and unbuttoned his outer jacket, but after a brief struggle when he moaned and tried to push her hands away, she gave up on the idea of taking it off, though the heat in the igloo was making them both sweat by now. She contented herself with opening his jacket and the one under it. Then she set about searching him for other weapons, and strapped to his right thigh she discovered another smaller dagger, this one with a curved blade. Keira also found his money pouch, and after a moment's consideration, took that also, reasoning that Bratchy would have it off him the instant he was finished attending to his precious dogs. Covering Astor with a light skin only as far as his waist, and hoping that with rest he would revive, she then set about concealing the weapons on her own person, using Freddy's sheaf to attach one of the knives to her leg just below the knee, as she used to do with her dirk. The second weapon Keira thrust down the leg of her boot.

With that done she took stock of her surroundings. The main room of the igloo led into a sidewise corridor running off to the right, and at the end of it was the opening to the outside. Several times that day

Keira warily approached that opening and peeped out to find an Eskimo stationed atop Bratchy's komatik with a rifle in his hand, the gun trained on their igloo. Though as the long day dragged on the guard sometimes changed, the gun always stayed the same, and these guards were alert, waving her back into her prison the instant they spotted her face at the door. And they had plenty of help from the dogs tethered nearby.

Twice more Soolah appeared with food, but to Keira's surprise, Bratchy himself didn't put in an appearance. Soon she knew why. By late afternoon the sounds of drunken revelry resounded throughout the settlement as the entire population, including many of the children, binged on the kegs of liquor that Bratchy had brought them. By the evening men, women, and children were reeling about the village bawling, singing, and in some cases hurling abuse at each other at the top of their lungs. Several fights erupted, even among the women, and they would slap and kick and beat each other with whatever weapon was handy. In a short time the pure virgin snow had been stained red in places, or other virulent hues where the natives had spewed up the contents of their stomachs.

Sickened, Keira hurried back to the main room and sat down beside Freddy and, more vigorously now, tried to wake him. After a few minutes she succeeded in getting some sense out of him. "My head . . ." he moaned. "It's on fire." He blinked up at her, then gasped, "Mein Gott, I cannot see clearly. Your face is swimming."

Distractedly, Keira patted his cheek and said soothingly, "It will pass, never fear. Oh, Freddy, the ghastly

mess you've landed us in! It's likelike hell out there with all of them drinking, and if Seth Bratchy comes back . . ." she broke off, shuddering.

"If I only had my gun!" Astor said.

It would have helped, though Keira doubted that it would have done much good. She had noticed during her furtive observations that many of the villagers had guns, no doubt given to them by Bratchy. Nor could she discount the dogs, and there were numerous vicious-looking animals roaming about the village, even aside from Bratchy's team.

"My knife" Freddy fumbled at his belt, but Keira caught his hand, saying, "I have it. I took it off you when you were unconscious, not

sure when you would wake up, and if you can't see very well"

He gripped her hand, advising, "Wait for the moment when, you can get Bratchy alone, then don't hesitate. Use it on him! With him out of the way we might be able to put the fear of death into the Eskimos. Most other Indians have a healthy respect for white authority. We could pretend . . ." he rubbed at his temple, wincing, ". . . pretend that there's a posse on its way here from Hudson Bay. That might frighten them into treating us . . . better. We might even be able to talk them into sending us back."

Keira looked down into his battered face. "Why did you do it, Freddy?" she asked him quietly.

There was a long silence, and she thought he might have lost consciousness again, but then he sighed, "Because I love you, Keira, and I wanted to have you to myself." Another pause, then he suddenly burst out, "I'm worthless! I never do things right. I wanted to be like John Jacob, you see, but . . ."

"Don't talk now," Keira told him gently. "You're exhausting yourself."

But he tried to raise himself up, his eyes wavering on her face. "Duval is the better man. I should never

have taken you away from him. He would have done right by you, Keira, but now . . ." he slumped back on the rugs and burst into tears, sobbing, ". . . now you will never see him again because of me."

"Wheest, now, don't think about it." Very gently Keira began to stroke his cheek, and eventually he drifted back to sleep and she too wept when there was no one to see her.

Long into the night the drinking went on, one keg after another cracked open and quickly consumed. For a while Bratchy drank with them, drank until he could hardly stand up, then he dropped where he stood and passed out. But he was a man who required very little sleep, and his rugged constitution quickly recovered from alcohol abuse. As his wife Soolah threw a few rugs on top of him, she knew that he would sleep for four hours at the most and would rise at about six or seven o'clock in the morning. Then, as he had told her, he would be off to check his fishing hole around the curve of the bay, and he had made it clear that she wouldn't go with him. But the white woman would! Soolah knew that without having to be told.

For an instant as she gazed down at him snoring like a bear, Soolah felt like kicking him in the face, or taking her sharp little ooloo and jabbing it into the pulse she could see throbbing at his throat. Bratchy was often cruel to her and took no interest in their four children, and if she hadn't been so terrified of him she could have told the Commissioner at Hudson's Bay some interesting facts about this husband of hers, secrets that would have landed him in jail and eventually to the scaffold.

But there was nothing she dared do. Even her people were frightened of him. Some even maintained that he was the embodiment of the evil white spirit who lived in the mountains and brought the killing

snows. Others . . . well, some had been won over by the many fine gifts he brought them and all the alcohol he gave them to drink; they had not imbibed like that before he came among them. If he were truly an evil spirit it would do no good to kill him; he would only come back to seek retribution. With that chilling thought Soolah quickly walked away.

From the moment the storm started to die down and visibility cleared, Luc and his team got under way. This time, he made clear, there would be no stopping until they caught up with Bratchy and his captive.

Luc was like a man possessed as he urged the dogs on, faster and faster, not that they needed urging after their rest. They were splendid animals, the finest strain of Russian sled dogs to be had, and Sanjo knew how to handle them.

Clemson glanced at Luc's haggard face, then with a sigh turned away. He had spent eight years on Hudson Bay and knew better than most the impossible task they were up against. There were a million isolated places in the frozen north where Bratchy could hide out with his victim and never be found. It didn't help either that the wind had obliterated all tracks. In his heart Clemson felt little hope, though he took care not to convey that to Luc Duval. So they would go through the motions of stopping at the many tiny Eskimo settlements dotted about, even though he knew that the Eskimos prided themselves on never betraying one of their own regardless of what that person had done to the white man, and Bratchy, he knew, was married to an Indian woman, so they would never betray him either.

The trapper had always been secretive about his private life during the

times he came to Hudson's Bay with his pelts, and none of the people there knew for

certain whether he lived at Nilssen Point or Helsingor, though it was believed that his wife was from one of those settlements. Helsingor was nearest, so Clemson had advised that they try that village first.

Everything was eerily quiet when Luc's team pulled into Helsingor just before eight o'clock the following morning, and that was very unusual with an Eskimo settlement that had few visitors. About the only ones to greet them were the dogs and one lone old man slicing up a dead seal outside the village store. Sanjo engaged him in conversation, but when their guide translated he had little to relate. "He say Bratchy not here. Not see him for long time."

Luc glanced around the settlement. "Where are all the people?"

"I ask him that," Sanjo replied. "He say they still in bed."

"That's odd," muttered Peter Clemson. "Eight o'clock in the morning and they're all still in bed!" In his experience the Eskimos never seemed to sleep at all. In a land where the sun shone for twenty-four hours it wasn't unusual to see people ice fishing in the middle of the night, or out hunting seal and caribou. Aside from that, the Eskimos almost always came out in force to greet visitors, even if only to see what presents the strangers had for them. Stepping up to the old fellow busily hacking away at the seal, Peter thrust his company badge under his nose, and through Sanjo ordered the man to go from house to house and wake up the villagers.

"I'm going with him," said Luc, fully intending to search every house in Helsingor, even if he had to do so at gunpoint. What he saw on his rounds sickened him. It was quickly obvious to Luc that the inhabitants had recently indulged in a massive drinking binge, with the usual casualties. In every home he entered he saw men, women, and children sprawled in

varying degrees of inebriation, many of them injured from the fights that must have taken place the previous night, and the few who were even slightly coherent were suffering from gigantic hangovers.

None of them would speak to Sanjo or answer his questions, so they had to fall back on the old fisherman once more. By this time Luc was taut with frustration. "Ask him where they got the liquor," he told Sanjo, barely able to restrain his impatience, the thought eating at the back of his mind that they were wasting precious time by tarrying here.

The old Eskimo came out with a rambling story about a wedding, and how the people had saved up to buy enough spirits to toast the bride and groom in style. The alcohol had been bought, he said, at the

Hudson's Bay store by one of their hunters who had recently sold some furs there. He named the hunter.

Clemson sighed, "I've never heard of him, but then I have nothing to do with that aspect of the business."

The four men looked at each other. There seemed to be nothing more to do but go on. "Nilssen Point that way," said Sanjo, and pointed west. "You want we start now?"

Luc hesitated. Somehow the elderly man's story sounded too pat. And all the time he was telling it he never once looked at them, but kept his eyes on the seal he was skinning. "We'll take another look around." Even as he said it, Luc felt that he was probably beginning to imagine things; so desperate was he to find Keira that everything was making him suspicious.

At first it seemed that they had no better luck the second time around. They found nothing that pointed to Bratchy's having been in the vicinity, nor were the Eskimos any more communicative, though Luc felt now that some of them were only pretending to be drunk. On their rounds they discovered two empty

igloos in the village, and when they queried the old man he said that one was always kept for visitors and the other he hesitated for a second belonged to one of their hunters who was away at the present time. But as he said that his eyes flickered away from the seal's carcass and down the beach.

Luc, following the direction of his eyes, scanned the empty beach sparkling in the sunshine. He knew that he was looking north, and Nilssen Point was due west.

"We're wasting our time here," Clemson said, and started back for the sled, Maurice and Sanjo following. Luc continued to peer northward for a moment more, but the long shoreline curving all the way around the bay was empty except for the ever-present gulls. The snow had been heavily trampled all over the entire village and even beyond, they had noticed, with tracks leading off in all directions where the Eskimos had gone to hunt and fish. Seeing his companions waiting for him impatiently, Luc stamped back to the sled and climbed in, a preoccupied expression on his face. Sanjo twisted around to look at him. "Now we go Nilssen Point?"

Luc, from the corner of his eye, saw the old fisherman watching them,

his head raised now, the seal momentarily forgotten.

"Yes," he said loudly, "Nilssen Point."

They pulled away from the settlement in a westerly direction and kept going for almost a mile, the ground very flat here so that objects and movements could be seen a long way off, and anyone back in Helsingor who cared to could watch their progress. But as soon as they came to a rise in the ground, a low range of something that looked like massive boulders heaved up in a bygone time, Luc called to Sanjo to halt the team.

All of the men stared at him in surprise, Clemson with some irritation.

"We are going north," Luc announced, "but keep to these hills until we get around the bay. I have a hunch we might find some fresh sled tracks in the snow there."

"And what if we do?" Clemson snorted. "It won't mean anything. There were sled tracks all over the place in Helsingor. Anyone in the village could have made them."

"True," Luc said, "but from the shape they are in, no one would have left the settlement this morning, and remember, the storm would have washed old tracks away. So we will see . . ."

He was right. They found one clear set of tracks stretching back in the direction of the point leading around the bay to Helsingor, and in the other direction heading north. Luc's blood leaped at the sight of those tracks in the unmarred snow and what they could mean to him, the end of a search that had taken him thousands of arduous miles.

Clemson clapped him on the shoulder, cautioning, "Don't get your hopes up."

Don't get his hopes up! Hope was the only thing he had had to sustain him for almost nine long months, the most miserable months of his life, when each day, each hour, drove home to him how much Keira meant to him and how empty and bleak his life was without her. Hope was the only thing that had kept him from going insane.

She had to kill him. It was her only hope of ever getting away.

Keira lay on the pile of skins where Bratchy had put her and watched him light the stove and fan it to blazing life with a pair of leather bellows. Orange flames flickered up the hard-packed snow walls to blend with the eerie bluish light that filled the interior of the igloo, larger than the one they'd been kept in at Helsingor. She was alone with him now. Early that morning he'd come into their snowhouse in the settlement and roughly hauled Freddy away; Keira had no idea what the trapper had done with Astor. Then about half an hour later he had returned for her, tied her up, and tossed her into the back of his sled like a bag of seal meat, turning a deaf ear to her pleas. There was not a soul about the village when they left, but Keira knew they were being watched; she could feel it. But nobody came to her aid.

Now it was just the two of them in the igloo

surrounded by a silent world of snow and ice, the chill in Keira's bones in keeping with the elements. But somehow, somehow she had to overcome the numbing fear that was rapidly paralyzing her mind and body, so that rational thought was quickly becoming impossible. And if there was ever a time when she needed to stay cool and alert it was now as she waited, her nerves screaming, for the chance to use her knife. There could be no repeat of the crippling inertia that had gripped her that day in Strathvagan or she was finished, she told herself.

Keira's eyes roamed the room, looking for something she might be able to use. There was a proper table and two old wooden chairs and a cabinet with one of its doors missing. A stack of fishing gear lay in one corner, and Bratchy had brought in a sack of provisions and a keg of liquor.

There was a whip. It lay over the top of the cabinet with its long black coils snaking down across the floor, a shorter version of the one the trapper sometimes used on his dogs. And there was an iron contraption lying on the table. It looked something like handcuffs. Next to it were the two knives that Bratchy had just removed from his belt, and the short length of chain he had pulled out of his pocket.

Keira watched him remove his heavy mantle and the two thick jackets beneath it, then lean against the wall to pull off his topmost pair of trousers of wolf-skin lined with fur. "Getting nice and warm in here already, isn't it?" he commented, tossing the clothes on the floor in a heap. "Didn't I tell you I'd make it all hot and cozy for us? Trust old Seth, he always keeps a promise."

He raised his head and looked at Keira and gave her his snarling smile.

"You and I are going to have some rare fun," he

said. He waved around the igloo. "There's everything here we need."

At the sight of her pale, pinched face and dread-filled eyes he suddenly bellowed with laughter. "I surprised you, didn't I? You thought I'd be too drunk to remember, isn't that right? Well, you don't know Seth Bratchy. He *never* forgets. Duval could have told you that."

"What did you do with Freddy?" she burst out, trying hard not to show him her terror, thinking that keeping him talking would delay the plans he had for them and give her more time to think of a way out. But all he did in answer was shrug. Then he picked up one of the knives and strode toward Keira cringing back in her bed of furs until her back came in contact with the snowy walls, cold and as unyielding as stone, and grabbing her bound hands he muttered, "We'll just get these ropes off you and make you more comfortable. Then you can take all your clothes off"

"You'll be punished for this!" Keira gasped, trying not to look too closely at the hideous contorted face bending over her, the empty eye socket with its crinkles and ridges, the puckered scars on his face. "They'll find you and punish you. Oh God, don't . . ." She tried to jerk her hands away from contact with him.

"Naw." Bratchy shook his head. "No fear of that, sweet thing. I can vanish where they'll *never* find me not that I have to. They don't know for certain that you and Astor even came away with me, nor will they ever be able to prove it." He sliced through the rope at her wrists, then bent to slit the bindings at her ankles. "There, that's much better," he said with satisfaction. "We want you to be able to move." Chuckling, he went to the cabinet and fished about for a moment, then brought out a jar of something that

looked like half-melted lard to Keira and held it out for her inspection. "Know what this is?" When she didn't answer he said, "It's bear grease. Makes a lovely ointment for the skin. Now" his voice dropped to a throaty whisper "take your clothes off. Do it nice and slow, teasing like." His tongue came out to moisten his lips. "I'll tell you a secret. I'm very easily bored, and when I'm bored I'm apt to be churlish and a mite mean." He giggled suddenly, his one eye filled with the dark

glow of the fire. "I look around for fresh amusement and, well . . . the things I come up with wouldn't appeal to you, so it would be to your advantage to make sure I never get tired of you. Understand me?"

He was mad! Insane! "Please don't do this," Keira cried hopelessly.

Bratchy stood back a few feet and watched her intently. His face was flushed, sweat glistening on his brow. Keira could see that he was tense with excitement. "Oh," he said, "you'll like it. Once you peel down to the skin I'm going to rub this grease here all over you, into every little nook and crevice, and make you all nice and oily and slick, so satiny to the touch. Then you can do the same to me. You'll soon see how much I like it." He exploded in a wild guffaw that curdled her blood, ending with a roar. "Stand up and get those clothes off! Now!" His eye flickered to the whip atop the cabinet and Keira, cold as ice, rose unsteadily. Her shaking hands went to the buttons of her jacket, thankful that she had so many layers of clothes on. She suddenly knew what she had to do. She would pretend to go along with him, then appear to have trouble with the buttons, and when he came to help as she knew he would she'd be ready with the knife.

Her outer jacket dropped off and the one below it.

"Hurry!" Bratchy urged thickly, "I'm getting so hot . . ."

By the time Keira got down to the last layer, a shirt and padded trousers that were too large for her, clothes belonging to Bratchy's wife, he was quivering with anticipation and sweating profusely, his skin a deep mottled red so that the scars stood out lividly. His quick, rasping breath drowned out the sound of the wind outside, the faint hissing of the stove, even the blood pounding in Keira's ears.

Suddenly he began to throw his clothes off, one garment after another, hurling his boots under the table, clawing at his belt. It was a moment before Bratchy noticed that Keira seemed to be having trouble with the buttons of her blouse.

"C-can you help me?" she choked. "They seem to be stuck."

He was across the room in a flash ripping the blouse off her in shreds, knocking her down on the bed, and throwing himself on top of her, his sweating hands squeezing her breasts, wrenching at her trousers. "Get them off!" he panted. "I can't wait."

"Yes," Keira said quickly, terrified that he would do it for her and find

the knife. Fumbling, her fingers so stiff and numb that they were practically useless, she managed to get several buttons undone at her side, enough to slip her hand through, and when she raised her leg slightly, her hand came in contact with the dagger. With a desperate jerk Keira pulled it out of its sheath and as Bratchy greedily nuzzled her breast, his head lowered, his arm flung across her, she brought it out and raised it above his shoulders when he started to rise to take her trousers off himself.

Keira brought the weapon down with all her might, but the trapper caught its cold flash in the light of the stove and threw up his arm to deflect the blow. It

barely grazed his wrist before the blade went flying. upward to embed itself in the snowy ceiling where it quivered for a moment, sending feathery shadows dancing on the roof, before clattering back to the floor.

"Bitch!" Bratchy snarled, and struck her hard across the face, stunning her. Then he pulled off her boots, found the other knife and discarded it, and ripped off the rest of her clothes. Her head cleared to feel him roughly parting her legs, thrusting them wide to make room for his bulk between them, and she screamed, twisting and turning beneath him, trying to claw at his face, get a grip of his hair. He smiled down into her face. "I like that," he told her hoarsely. "Wriggle and squirm all you like. It just . . ."

The dogs were growling outside. One of them began to bark.

Bratchy raised his head, listening. "Damn brutes! That scream of yours must have upset them."

They were all barking furiously now.

"Shut up!" the trapper bellowed, and when they didn't obey he got off the bed and stamped naked to the opening and stuck his head outside. He could see the dog team gazing in his direction, not another living thing in sight, all the huskies with their pale eyes fastened on the igloo, acting as if he were a stranger the way they were snarling and showing their teeth. "Quiet, you bloody idiots!"

Luc Duval stepped around the side of the building and shot him in the thigh.

Then, with his heart in his mouth, afraid of what he would find inside,

Luc jumped over the trapper and plunged into the igloo. It took his eyes a moment to adjust after the brilliant sunshine and snow-glare outside, and for a second Luc's hopes plummeted. The room seemed to be empty. The light was a weird dusky-blue, the area around the stove a dull, glowing

orange. The usual accouterments of a trapper's life lay around, but the place was a shambles with clothes, knives, and other items scattered everywhere, almost as if the recent storm had somehow invaded the building. Luc's eyes were drawn to the bed, in reality a heap of musty-smelling pelts stacked up against the far wall pelts that moved.

With a jolt he saw her! She was curled up like an animal and almost totally hidden in the nest of skins with only her eyes and the tip of her nose showing, and those eyes stared at Luc, transfixed, as if they couldn't believe what they were seeing. He heard a tiny whimper, no louder than the meowing of a kitten, the sweetest sound that Luc had ever heard in his life.

Afterwards he had no recollection of crossing that room, but never would he forget the intense joy and relief he felt when he sank down on the bed beside Keira and took her in his arms, staring into her face, burrowing his head in her neck, showering her with kisses, too moved at first to utter a word. At that wondrous moment it was enough to know that she was alive; that the long months of anguish were at an end; that they were together again.

When the shot had rung out and Luc suddenly appeared in the room, Keira had been sure that she was dreaming; that the fierce yearning and sense of loss she had battled since the day they had been separated feelings she had struggled to ignore had somehow produced a vision of a man who had never been out of her thoughts. Then Luc had touched her, kissed her, held her so tenderly and Keira knew she was not hallucinating. She felt a rush of such profound happiness that she could no longer hide from the truth. She loved Luc and always would, yes, regardless of what he had done to her, she just couldn't help herself and there was no point in denying it any longer.

Finally they drew apart and looked at each other searchingly. Keira saw the dread in his eyes, the question Luc was loath to ask her, and she shook her head. "He didn't hurt me . . . not that way."

Her teeth were chattering, though it was very warm in the room. She began to shake violently as reaction set in. Luc drew her close to him,

murmuring soothingly, reassuring her, gently stroking her hair, kissing her over and over. But he was alarmed at the state Keira was in. She had lost so much weight, and most of her bloom was gone. There were bluish hollows about her eyes, and he wondered when she had last had a good night's sleep. Much as Luc was anxious to get back to Hudson Bay with his prisoner, he was afraid to move Keira immediately, so delicate and exhausted did she seem, thin and brittle as glass in his arms.

Safe now, Keira was suddenly asleep, a deep, refreshing sleep such as she hadn't enjoyed from the day she had been kidnapped from the day she had last seen Luc. He held her for a while, then settled her back among the rugs and drew the covers up to her chin. Pressing a gentle kiss to her pale lips, he went back outside, ready to deal with Seth Bratchy.

He found Peter Clemson interrogating the trapper, demanding to know what he had done with Freddy Astor. Bratchy, not badly hurt and only limping from a flesh wound where Luc's bullet had nicked his upper leg, swore that he had released Freddy not long before they arrived. "He was bothering the woman, so I let him go," he said, with a sly glance at Luc. "That's the last I've seen of him."

In a way it was true, although it had happened much earlier that morning. Bratchy had carried Astor to a large hole in the ice and had indeed let him go, and the last he had seen of the star-crossed German had been the top of his flaxen head sinking down through

fathoms of inky water.

Clemson eyed the trapper skeptically, certain he was lying. But he was still duty-bound to check it out. "Where exactly did you leave him?"

Bratchy pointed north. "In the shelter of a cave around those bluffs yonder. He'll probably stay in the cave today and leave first thing in the morning. He'd been drinking, you see, and was in no shape"

"Take us to the spot," the Hudson's Bay man broke in curtly. "If you can't walk we'll go by sled."

The prisoner assured them that he could walk, all the time choking back an impulse to laugh, amazed at how easily they had fallen for the bait but then he wasn't a trapper for nothing. Now all that remained for him to do was to lead them to the snare, the cave where he had concealed emergency supplies in case they were ever needed,

including a small arsenal of weapons. One of the rifles was ready to hand and already loaded. It was only one of the many caches Bratchy had thoughtfully provisioned scattered about the territory, nor would this be the first time he'd had reason to be glad of his foresight.

Luc watched them leave with strong misgivings, with Bratchy limping along leading the way. There was no question of Luc going and leaving Keira, but Maurice offered to accompany Clemson and Sanjo in the search for the German. They trudged through the biting cold, the ice-encrusted snow snapping and crunching under their boots, and soon disappeared from view around the bluff. Luc had a powerful urge to run after them and warn them not to trust the trapper, but Clemson had his duty to do and it was doubtful that he'd have listened, he thought with a sigh.

The other four men continued on, the frozen Bay with its fissures and holes showing patches of black water on their right, jagged cliffs on their left, the

latter seeming to move steadily closer with each step they took until the track they were following was no more than twenty feet wide, the frigid Bay on one side and the towering rocks on the other.

Maurice looked pointedly at Clemson as if to say, I don't like this.

Neither did the Hudson's Bay man, especially when he noticed deep caverns in the nearby cliffs, places where a fugitive could hide, assuming that he could break away from them. Raising his gun to the broad back in front of him, Clemson shouted a warning. "Take one wrong step, Bratchy, and it will be your last."

The sound of his voice boomed like thunder in the pristine silence, and Maurice wanted to cover his ears as the rumbling echo bounced away among the cliffs to fade eerily into the distance. It disturbed a flock of gulls perched on the rocky outcropping high overhead and they fluttered up into the hard blue sky, squawking raucously, indignant at being disturbed. In the Bay some basking seals raised peevish heads in their direction, then slithered to their breathing holes and plunged down into the freezing water out of sight. Maurice shook his head, thinking there was something ghostly and unearthly about this land that made a man want to talk in whispers. He felt a touch of superstitious fear akin to what he often experienced when passing through certain areas around Lake Superior. Much of this country was haunted, the voyageur was convinced of it. His flesh had cringed

when Clemson shouted out.

Bratchy was miffed at the warning. He glowered back over his shoulder, snarling, "For the love of God, keep quiet! Do you want to start an avalanche? These cliffs are heavy with snow."

Looking back at them as he was, the trapper failed to see the white apparition blundering out of a cave

directly into his path, then rearing up on its powerful hind legs to emit a thunderous bellow of its own. Maurice only had time to scream, "Mon Dieu!" before the polar bear clutched Bratchy in a bone-crushing embrace and, before the horrified eyes of the others, proceeded to punish him severely for daring to disturb its slumber.

"He's dead," said Clemson when they returned to the igloo to find Luc unloading some of the equipment off the sled, just enough to tide them over for the night. "There was nothing we could do. It was all over in a minute."

Maurice looked green, even though the voyageur was a man who had witnessed some hair-raising events in his travels and was not noted for his squeamishness.

Luc glanced at the igloo. "Say nothing to Keira about this. She's had a big enough shock as it is. What about Astor?"

The Hudson's Bay man shrugged. "Gone. My feeling is that Bratchy killed him."

It was decided that Clemson and Sanjo should return to Hudson Bay at once. If they were gone before she awoke, Keira would assume that the trapper had been taken back with them. The problem was that they would have to use Bratchy's dog team, which could pose a serious problem since, apparently, they would not move for anyone but their owner. The experienced Sanjo just laughed at the idea. "Leave this to me." He had been working with huskies all his life.

The lead dog from the Bay team was a female. Once he fed Bratchy's dogs a large meal, Sanjo allowed his little female to mingle among them and get acquainted, grinning knowingly when Stryker and the others showed the usual energetic response. Sniffing her carefully, they also caught the scent of her handler,

and in accepting the one they were less inclined to reject the other. So after the dogs had showed off a little by growling and baring their teeth which didn't impress Sanjo at all he was able to hitch his female to the lead position, and soon the dogsled was streaking away in the direction of the point. Watching them leave, Luc and Maurice chuckled, admiring the way the silvery patches of the huskies' coats glinted in the sun, all of them bounding along enthusiastically, happy to get back to their main business in life, the job they'd been bred for.

"If Bratchy could see them now," said Luc.

"We forget him," Maurice replied, shuddering. "Not say no more."

Luc nodded and they turned back to the task at hand, to make Keira far more comfortable than when they had found her, beginning by carrying a clean bundle of pelts into the igloo to replace the fetid heap she was sleeping on. One of the fresh furs was snowy-white.

Luc had been working inside the igloo for several minutes when he turned to find Keira smiling at him a little wistfully. She was thinking that he too was thinner, his handsome face gaunt, with a few lines around his eyes that hadn't been there before. She had no idea how he had found her, whether by accident or design, but never would she forget the sheer joy and relief on Luc's face when he walked into the igloo to discover that she was all right. That was love! There was no other word to describe that look. He *did* love her dearly.

When he saw that she was awake he went to her and kissed her. "Better?"

She snuggled against him. "Much better." After a minute she looked into his face, her own anxious again. "What about Bratchy and Freddy?"

"Clemson has taken Bratchy back to the fort," he

said, lying to spare her. "As for Freddy, his whereabouts remains a mystery."

Keira looked troubled. "They fell out on the way up here."

Luc could well guess why. "Because of you?"

"Please . . . can we not talk about it anymore?" She burst into tears.

"Mon Dieu! I'm sorry, my darling." Luc drew her closer, kissing her wet face, the touch of his lips very gentle. He could feel her trembling and could only guess at the misery she had endured. Now he cursed himself for not thinking to bring Dr. Cabot along. Cabot could have given her something to calm her down. A long soak in a hot tub would have helped, but the nearest he saw to a bathing receptacle in the room was a large iron cauldron that Bratchy had probably used to boil fish or cook caribou or seal meat. Still . . . it was big, he thought, and Keira had grown shockingly thin. She could at least stand in the thing to wash.

First, though, Luc tried to cheer her up.

He pushed the tangled hair away from her face and grinned at her. "We've got to fatten you up. How would you like roast beef for dinner?"

"I'm worried about Freddy. I'm not sure I could eat."

"Astor certainly didn't waste much time worrying about you!"

That was true enough. "Do you *really* have roast beef?"

Luc nodded. "The Hudson's Bay people packed enough food to last us a month. I believe they even threw in a few bottles of wine." He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her. "Mademoiselle and Monsieur will dine in style!"

Keira laughed, brightening, then made a face when she looked down at herself and sniffed the fusty pelts. "Mademoiselle is far from stylish," she said ruefully.

"Oh, if only I could have a bath!"

In the end Luc cleaned out the cauldron and filled it with fresh snow and set it to melt and boil atop the stove. From the sled he brought in soap and a huge yellow sponge, also one of his shirts for her to wear. "Oh no!" said Keira, pretending disdain when he presented her with the garment. "Mademoiselle will wear furs tonight," she said, mimicking his accent, and picked up the snowy pelt, rubbing it appreciatively against her cheek.

Smiling, happy to see her in better spirits again, Luc went out and left Keira to wash herself down in private.

She was forced to scrub at herself section by section, then wait for fresh water to boil to wash her hair, but the clean warm water and faint woodsy perfume of the soap left Keira feeling quite pampered, then luxurious as she wrapped herself in the pristine-white fur. Combing out her wet hair, she tried not to think of Freddy Astor, though it was difficult. There was nothing she could do about Freddy, she told herself, and more than anything in the world she wanted nothing to cloud her reunion with Luc. She was anxious to see Maurice too; he had only poked his nose around the door shortly after they had found her, told her how much they had all missed her and blown her a kiss, then had tactfully stayed away so that she and Luc could be alone together.

Keira decided that Maurice must join them for dinner, even if she had to insist. Later . . . she shivered deliciously, her senses, dulled for so long, suddenly coming alive again . . . later she and Luc could talk in private.

26

"Magnifique! Even more beautiful than before!" Maurice toasted Keira expansively with his fifth cup of wine. "Ah . . . it too much for these old eyes of mine to behold."

Keira laughed and glanced at Luc, who also raised his cup to her, the smoldering expression in his dark eyes making her blood leap.

They were ranged comfortably around the stove, their meal finished, two empty bottles of wine on the table and a third, almost full, beside them on the floor. The atmosphere inside the igloo was festive as they celebrated their success at finding Keira and at all being together again. Sitting cross-legged on a pelt wrapped in her arctic fox fur, Keira was radiant, her clear gray eyes sparkling with happiness, her hair clean and silky, coppery in the rosy glow of the fire. Her skin was very flushed, her curling lashes casting a feathery shadow on her cheeks, the weight she had lost

only adding a delicacy to her beauty, an exquisite purity.

The mood had been light and Luc wanted to keep it that way, so he was annoyed when Maurice leaned forward and touched Keira's hand, saying, "Now tell us all that happen since we last see you at Fort William."

When her eyes dropped to the cup in her hand, Luc shot a warning glance at Maurice and told her, "We won't speak of it now if you'd rather not."

Keira sighed, thinking that delaying the telling of it wouldn't make it any easier. But there was one part she couldn't mention in front of Maurice the awful things Francois had told her about Luc. That part she would certainly omit; even thinking about that miserable day at Fort William, when her hopes and happiness had been destroyed, took away much of the joy she felt now. She was afraid to glance at Luc lest he read the hurt and resentment she still felt in her eyes, even though she was so happy to see him.

"Well . . . Francois was the one who actually took me away from the fort," Keira began, her attention on the stove in front of her, though she was very conscious of Luc watching her closely. "Of course Freddy was his accomplice and met up with us later, farther down the lake."

"How Francois take you out?" Maurice pressed. After thousands of miles combing the wilderness, he was eager to hear every single detail of how it had all come about. He perhaps more than anyone knew exactly what the long search had cost Luc and he was anxious to hear a full explanation.

"Oh . . ." she said, trying not to think of that stuffy little room in the warehouse where Francois had taken her to break his hideous news, ". . . he came up behind me when I was on my way to tea with Ellen Milton, and knocked me out," she lied, careful not to

meet Luc's eyes. "When I woke up I was in a canoe. My hands and feet were tied. We went quite a distance down the lake, then waited for Freddy to catch up with us."

"And they kept you restrained?" Luc asked her, trying to catch her eye.

Keira shook her head, gazing at the fur folded around her, stroking it absently, her face turned away from him. "No, but I couldn't get away; they watched me all the time."

"I see." Luc's mind went to the time Keira had managed to slip away from his own party shortly after they entered Lake Superior, only to fall into the clutches of the Buzzard People. And his party too had made a point of watching her, especially himself. Gazing at Keira, Luc sensed something evasive in her attitude; something about her story that didn't quite ring true. She was a poor liar and, he felt, was

making a hash of it now. From his own experience of Keira he knew her to be courageous, determined, and highly resourceful, not the type to sit meekly and accept her fate. Had they kept her tied up it would have been different, but . . .

Keira hurried on with her story, with Maurice interrupting frequently to ask her to clarify a point, but Duval asked very few questions. Luc was annoyed at himself for doubting her; she had come through so much, he reminded himself, and was suffering from the aftermath now, and in no state to think clearly. The real story would all come out eventually, Luc thought, and warned himself not to start imagining things or spoil their reunion by being suspicious.

Then, to his irritation, he heard Maurice say the moment Keira finished, "We look all over country for you. Go nearly four thousand mile. We search from time you vanish from Fort William."

Her eyes jumped to Luc's face then, wide and

startled. "Four thousand miles?" she whispered.

"Oui." The voyageur nodded, oblivious to the frown Luc gave him. "No do no business. We's too much upset. Search everywhere."

Tears gushed into Keira's eyes, and at the sight of them Maurice turned helplessly to Luc and finally saw his displeasure. The little man hastily gulped the rest of his wine and stood up, muttering, "Ts go and look out, see what happen outside. Check dogs . . . maybe they hungry."

The instant he left, Keira was in Luc's arms, burrowing as close as she could to get to him, her arms tight around his neck. He had spent the entire nine months searching for her! A journey of four thousand miles! His business neglected, the loss of revenue and cost of the search itself bound to be exorbitant, not to mention the physical and mental cost to himself and his men. And she had doubted his love for her! Oh, dear God, she felt so ashamed! From the very day she had met Luc at the auction rooms in Montreal she had distrusted him and suspected his motives for buying her bond, and later, at Fort William, she had still found reason to doubt him and swallowed the miserable lies that Francois had told her about him. How Keira loathed herself for that now. When Luc raised her wet face to his, she could hardly bring herself to meet his eyes, and suddenly leaned forward and kissed him instead, infusing all the love, respect, the sheer adoration she felt for him into that kiss, promising herself at the same time that she

would never, ever question Luc again. Never!

When he drew back from her, Luc's eyes were sparkling. "I think you are quite glad to see me," he grinned.

"I'm the happiest girl on earth."

His eyes moved tenderly over her face. "Then you missed me a little?"

"I missed you a lot!" Keira smiled through her tears. "I yearned for you every minute every second of every single day. I even ached for you in my dreams."

"I too." His smile faded a little as he remembered all the endless miles, the fleeting hope, the crushing despair, the times when cool reason told him that it was useless; that he should give up and somehow try to get on with his life; to forget her. *That* he had never been able to accept, and never would to his dying day.

"Don't look like that," Keira whispered, seeing the pain on his face and understanding it so well, having gone through its rigors daily since she had last seen him. She took his dear face between her hands and pressed her lips to his, and it was like sipping from a life-giving fountain and she thirsted to drink deeper! To slake nine months of parched existence, to love him so much and so thoroughly and totally that it would obliterate the dark times from his mind. "No man," Keira told him shakily, "is loved more than you."

"Nor a woman more than you, my darling."

"Yes," she said, "I know." And to know was to attain paradise.

Very gently Luc brushed the fur off her shoulders and gazed at her sweet form almost reverently, as a man will gaze at a priceless work of art, an object to be cherished. Her skin was like purest marble, her breasts rising firm and proud, the tips a dusky carmine in the light of the fire. He could see the faint fluttering beat of her heart, and bent his head to kiss it, and heard her sharp intake of breath as his hair grazed her breasts and his warm skin touched hers. He raised his head then and they looked into each other's eyes, and all the feelings and explanations, the hopes and desires that they wanted to convey to each other were suddenly unnecessary. Each knew that the other understood.

Luc picked her up and carried her to the pile of clean pelts and set her down in a lush bed of soft furs. Keira watched him undress, her eyes soft and shining, brimming with love for him, filled with pride. So handsome, she thought; leaner it was true, but the broad shoulders, the muscular arms and thighs, strong, masculine hands . . . hands she ached to feel taking possession of her in a way that no other man ever could.

Luc lay down beside her and took Keira hungrily in his arms, warning himself to be gentle with her. She felt so shockingly fragile . . . and so maddeningly desirable, her breasts against his chest, her mouth urgently seeking his, their thighs coming together and fitting in that special, provocative way. The control Luc was trying to exert over himself was immediately tested, and immediately began to crumble. It had been so long! And he needed her so much.

But as he kissed her, their tongues touching and exploring, his hand cupping her breast, Keira's fingers stroking his hip, Luc soon realized that he was not the only one who was needful, and that it wasn't necessary to be *quite* so careful with her. "My only love," she breathed, and crushed her mouth to his, seeking his tongue, her hands eagerly roving his back, the taut muscles of his thighs, his hips, then with a tiny moan, rising to plunge her fingers through his hair. "I want you so much," Keira confessed, all her emotions naked in her face. "Love me . . . love me, my darling! Oh, Luc . . ."

"And I love you," he told her passionately, his pulse leaping, tenderness and at-the same time a raw hunger blazing in his eyes. He threw restraint aside then, sensing that it was not what she needed; not what either of them needed at that special moment. He kissed her deeply, possessively, telling her through his

lips that she belonged only to him, and always would. In a rising fever of desire Luc ravished her mouth with his, then touched his moist lips to her ear, her throat, nibbling and teasing her nipples, his tongue tracing the arch of her ribs, the curve of her thigh, the silky-soft skin at the inside of her legs.

Moaning, Keira shifted about restlessly beneath him, her skin hot and flushed, tiny glistening beads of moisture appearing on her forehead, at her throat. She trembled violently in a welter of intense excitement, fire lapping at her flesh, sweeping through her blood, her thoughts fragmented, then spinning away into some shadowy void.

It was almost midnight but the sun was shining outside, an icy wind blowing down from the north, scattering the snow, making the air tinkle as crystalline particles of ice clashed and exploded in bursts of brilliant color aqua, pale rose-pink, Arctic green, the hue of the bergs floating majestically in the bay. Faraway mountains of mauve-purple. The sky above a hard, frigid blue. Snow as far as the eye could see, silver-crust and glittering in the sunlight. The dogs huddled close together, fast asleep. The world still, holding its breath, the restless wind the only sign of movement.

Inside the snow house it was warm and steamy, their harried breathing loud in the small room. When Luc finally pushed her back on the rugs, Keira lay with her eyes closed and gave herself up to sensation. She was aflame! Enraptured! Spellbound with the magic that Luc was bringing her, every touch, caress, every kiss sweeping her closer to the edge, that heady plunge she knew so well and had craved for so long. Their moving bodies, in silhouette, were thrown dark against the white wall, Luc's head bending to nuzzle her breast, her thighs, Keira's arms rising to his neck,

then flung back behind her head and her body arching, then falling, then arching once more and suddenly rigid.

"Oh God!" Her face was strained. "II"

Luc moved between her legs and their eyes met. Exquisite moment. They both wanted to savor that second or two of heart-stopping suspense. He loved her face at such times, so naked and exposed, somehow helpless and so incredibly dear to him. Still forcing himself to wait, Luc bent forward swiftly and kissed her. "Do you know how much I adore you?" His voice was hoarse, not quite steady.

Nor was Keira's when she whispered, "Yesoh, yes!"

Luc let himself sink down into a moist, pulsing darkness and felt her muscles tighten around him at once, like the clasp of a silken hand, opening and closing, the pressure light at first, then stronger, astonishingly powerful as her tension increased. Luc felt the blood rush to his head; heat burst out across his skin; a smoky haze clouded his vision. He felt a rampaging need to plunder and possess and his mouth on Keira's was wild, devouring, his hand at her breasts no longer tender. Lifting her by the buttocks he drove down in a frenzy of passion and felt a shuddering spasm pass through her body, stronger, more violent with each thrust he made. Her nails were digging at his

shoulders now, her kisses as voracious as his, her desire as out of control. Keira cried out suddenly and her eyes flew wide, locking with his, searing ecstasy breaking over them in tingling waves of fire.

They lay without speaking until their breathing slowed, Keira's head on his chest, Luc's cheek against her hair. They could hear the low hissing of the stove now and the wind whistling around the igloo. Feeling some of the feverish heat go out of her, Luc drew the

furs up around her shoulders. Keira lifted her face to him and he kissed her, tender once more.

"How I've hungered for this moment!" Luc told her feelingly, confessing. "There were times when I wondered if I would ever hold you again and feel your sweet warmth against my heart."

Keira's own heart melted at the adoration in his eyes, and never had she felt more deeply loved or more secure in that love, for surely, she thought, they were meant to be together; even the fates had yielded and led Luc to find her again. Her eyes took in every detail of his face, wondering if she should tell him about the baby now in this supreme closeness then suddenly decided against it, afraid of spoiling his happiness. No, Keira thought, tonight must be perfect with no sadness or regrets. He had not journeyed four thousand miles to be greeted by the news that he had lost a child. It could wait a few days.

They were insatiable that night, unable to get enough of each other. In between lovemaking Luc told her snippets of his plans. First they must return to Hudson Bay to return the dogsled and equipment. "And I've much to thank them for too," Luc said, explaining about the state he and his men were in by the time they reached York Factory. From the Bay they would go back to Lake Winnipeg to pick up the rest of his men, then travel on finally! to his own Fort Arrowhead in Athabasca. "I have a good manager and staff there," Luc told her, giving her a quick kiss on the tip of her nose, "and they will make my love most welcome."

It was enough for now, Keira told herself, thinking that when everything settled down and the time was right, Luc would ask her to marry him. In the meantime she would content herself and leave it to his good judgment, and she certainly wouldn't ask him embarrassing questions about his past. If there really *had*

been a Clarise Menard in his life and she only had Francois's word for

that then it was obviously long since over and done with. Luc seemed to have forgotten the woman, and so would she. Nothing, ever again, would be allowed to taint their love for each other, Keira promised herself. Secure now, she could be patient.

"When will we reach Athabasca?" she asked him.

"August, if all goes well."

"And how long will we stay there?"

Luc thought a minute, considering. Changes would have to be made in his long-range plans, now that he'd lost so much time, though what he'd found more than made up for it. "Until next May, possibly even August."

She almost asked him if there was a preacher at Athabasca, and swallowed it back just in time. "I never thought I would love a Frenchman," Keira said lightly, her eyes twinkling. "I'm going to have to learn your language."

"We are both fluent in the language that counts," he murmured, a wicked glint in his eyes, "though perhaps I'm a little more fluent than you, which entitles me to be your instructor."

With an exaggerated leer Luc pounced on her and rolled her under him.

The next day they started back to Hudson Bay. Keira and Luc were more than a little tired that morning, thought Maurice, watching them with a smile, but so glowingly happy that he was amazed their radiance didn't melt the snow.

The only awkward part came when they passed through Helsingor. The villagers turned out to meet them as they always did when strangers came by, but there was no welcome for them whatsoever under the

circumstances. For Luc to have avoided the settlement would have necessitated a long and difficult detour. Clemson had promised before he left that he would stop long enough to put the fear of death into the villagers; it was a serious offence to conceal a criminal and try to hide a crime, and the Hudson's Bay Company, with jurisdiction over the area, would certainly send officers back to investigate as Clemson would have told the Eskimos. He had felt reasonably sure that Luc

would have no trouble with them when he passed by. Luc wasn't worried about himself, but he *was* concerned for Keira. The trouble was that to go around them would have brought them into contact with a renegade band of Cree who during the past year had robbed and massacred the people at two of the Hudson Bay's minor outposts. Clemson, who knew the area, had strongly advised Luc to avoid them at all cost.

When they pulled into Helsingor they found what seemed like the entire population of the settlement out of doors. The people stood watching them sullenly, most of the men with weapons in their hands. Luc and Maurice too had their guns displayed conspicuously, but Luc was uncomfortably aware that there were a lot more Eskimos than there were of them. If they were attacked and he was injured or killed, he dreaded to think of what would become of Keira. With that in mind he had armed her with a pistol, and she too had several knives tucked into her belt.

It was important not to show fear, so Luc proceeded into Helsingor at a moderate pace where he could see the people out waiting for them. "Stay close to me," he muttered to Keira, "and try to seem unconcerned."

There wasn't a sound when they entered the village; even the children were silent. Hard black eyes bored into them. Normally friendly, there were no smiles on

the reddish-brown faces now, and as they passed through, the tension was horrendous. Luc could see that Bratchy, wily beast that he was, had taken pains to win these people over, supplying them with alcohol and other things they might not otherwise have been able to get. Aside from that, the trapper was married to one of their women married in the country way and that alone ensured him a place in their tribe.

No one tried to apprehend them, though if looks could kill, the three of them would be dead. Once clear of Helsingor village, Keira glanced back to see the inhabitants still watching them. She thought of Freddy Astor, and quailed. Freddy, she fretted, might still be back there hidden somewhere. She could imagine that if he heard their approach his hopes would have soared only to plummet once they passed by, leaving him behind. Then what would happen to him, assuming he was still alive? She could not imagine the Eskimos showing him much mercy.

Keira bit her lip as she remembered how she had felt in a similar position. True, Freddy had much to answer for where she was concerned but he was still a human being in desperate trouble.

She caught Luc's arm. "Poor Freddy, I wonder what's happened to him? He can't help feeling that we're abandoning him"

"There's nothing we can do without great risk to ourselves," Luc replied rather curtly, glancing at her worried face and the concern brimming in her eyes. "The Bay people will send men back to search for him"

"By then it could be too late!" All Keira's agitation came back and she threw a desperate glance over her shoulder, wondering if Astor could see them speeding away to safety while he . . .

"Oh, God, I feel so terrible!" Keira confessed, and she did for purely humanitarian reasons, but Luc felt a vicious twist of jealousy when he saw how upset she was. A dark memory came back into his mind as he recalled how Keira had danced and flirted with Astor the night of the ball at Fort William, totally ignoring Luc all the while. She hadn't once returned to his table all evening. Later, when he and Keira had made up their quarrel, she had taunted him about Astor, saying not that she needed to tell him! that Freddy was madly in love with her and had asked her to marry him. He was a gentleman, she had said, and from a *rich* family . . .

The thought suddenly blossomed like a poisonous flower in Luc's mind: could Keira have left Fort William *willingly* with Freddy Astor?

No! Luc tried to shrug it off. No, she would never have done that. How could he even entertain such a thought? She had been so glad to see him as well she might when she was in the grasp of Seth Bratchy!

He cracked the whip over the dogs' backs, not touching them but causing the huskies to leap forward with such force that Keira and Maurice almost tumbled from the sled. He could feel Keira staring at him but didn't dare turn to her, afraid she might see the murderous rage that he felt sure must be in his eyes at the idea of her deceiving him. And the vile suspicions were fairly crowding into his mind now, as if a door had been flung open to a charnel pit, his feeling that Keira hadn't quite been telling the truth when she'd related the circumstances surrounding her abduction from Fort William. If she'd gone with Astor of her own free will that would explain it, Luc thought bitterly.

Then . . . Keira snuggled up against him, her arm going around his waist. He glanced at her to see such

naked emotion on her face, such love in her eyes, that Luc groaned inwardly, hating himself and his cynical, skeptical mind, disgusted with himself for doubting her, and promising himself that it would never happen again. It occurred to Luc too that he had never before been jealous over a woman. It was a new and unpleasant experience for him. He had left Clarise quite unconcernedly in Paris, even while aware that Jules D'Arly was secretly in love with her, yet it hadn't bothered him. Because, he knew now, he himself had not been in love with Clarise Menard. But he was betrothed to her! It chilled Luc to think of how Keira would react were she to discover that all along he had been engaged to marry another woman even while professing to love her! More than anything in the world he wanted to ask Keira to marry him, but first he had to disentangle himself from Clarise, something that couldn't be done via a letter. Clarise, who had waited so long for him, deserved so much better than that. No, he thought, he would have to see her in person and somehow try to explain without hurting her too much.

After a minute Luc transferred the sled trace-ring to his left hand and put his free arm around Keira, hugging her close to him. Soon, he thought, he would visit Paris and make everything right. Feeling better at the thought, he said, "Wait till you see Athabasca. It's almost as wild and beautiful as my little Highland flower." His eyes were warm and tender once more.

"Athabasca . . ." Keira repeated, thinking that she would write it down in the journal where she had started to relate her life story, just as Luc had suggested. She could see herself writing in her best script, "Luc and I were married today in Athabasca in the year."

Would it be this year? Keira wondered. Or the next?

Oh, she was so impatient!

There was no reason that she could see for them to wait longer than that. Luc had told her that they might stay for an entire year at Fort Arrowhead in Athabasca, and by the end of that time surely! he would have made her his wife.

Leaning over her desk in the schoolroom at Fort Arrowhead, Keira wrote in large print in her journal, "WE HAVE BEEN A YEAR IN ATHABASCA TODAY."

Then she sat back and pursed her lips.

Directly in front of her, ranged around a long nicked and dented table, her ten pupils were quietly working on the assignment Keira had given them, to match names to the pictures of animals she had tacked up on the blackboard; like a cat, dog, pony, wolf. Identifying the creatures was the easy part, remembering the letters of their names much more difficult.

"Concentrate!" Keira urged nine-year-old Matty when his gaze moved to the window, his dark eyes catching the flight of a hawk circling in the sky, no doubt wishing *he* were as free and unencumbered. Keira, over the months since she'd started her school, had gotten so that she could almost read their minds.

Matty, she had found, was a naturally bright boy, yet his work often fell below the others because he could not discipline himself to concentrate. His father, Chief Lovaka, however, wanted him to learn, and had given Keira a whip, saying, "This make him get clever quick."

She wouldn't have dreamed of beating the children who came to her fort school. But many times Keira had had to fight back the impulse to use the whip on the owner of the fort himself! All the children lumped together were far less trouble to her than Luc Duval, and caused her far less mental anguish.

Keira glanced down at the words she had just written in her journal, and sighed. It was hard to believe that they'd been at Fort Arrowhead for an entire year; that nearly fifteen long months had passed since the day Luc had found her near Helsingor.

And he *still* hadn't asked her to marry him!

Keira knew nothing of the letter that had been waiting for Luc when he returned to Athabasca, a letter the fort manager handed to him in private. It was from Clarise, written from a clinic outside Paris, and the news contained a severe shock for Luc. Clarise had been suffering from the same consumptive disease that had taken the life of her father, though she hastened to add that in her case the prognosis was good. "Don't feel that you have to rush to my side," she'd gone on. "I'm not allowed visitors at this stage of the disease, but I'm told I should

be fully restored to health in a year or so. In the meantime, we must content ourselves by corresponding. We have waited this long, chéri, and can wait a little while longer."

Luc had never told Keira about Clarise, afraid of upsetting her. Now, with the passage of time, it was impossible to tell her and expect Keira to understand. He had made up his mind that when they returned to Montreal, he would make a quick visit to Paris and

speak to Clarise in person, explaining his change of heart. Once that was settled he would be free to marry the woman he loved, and at the same time Keira would be spared the hurt of knowing that, all along, there had been another woman in his life.

It had seemed the best way to handle things for all concerned but he should have known, Luc thought grimly, that it wouldn't be that simple. He was sorry now that he hadn't told Keira about Clarise from the very beginning, before they became lovers not that he'd anticipated that they *would* become lovers. To go to her now, after all this time, was unthinkable. Keira would be bound to think that he had set out to deceive her all along, and their relationship would be destroyed. That must never happen!

Now, with Clarise so ill . . .

Feeling like a cad, Luc dispatched a letter off to Paris in secret, promising Clarise that he would visit her the following year, once she had recovered enough to see people. Once that was done, there was nothing for it but to wrestle with the problem alone and try to hide the worry he felt from Keira as he asked himself how he could possibly break his pledge his word! to a woman who was ill, especially after all the Menards had done for him.

Fortunately, Luc was intensely busy from the moment they arrived at Fort Arrowhead and had little time to brood. The fort consisted of a substantial group of log buildings with a dwelling house that was spacious, well furnished, and comfortable, a safe little haven amid some of the wildest country that Keira had seen yet. Luc plunged into work, determined to make up all the time he had lost, but he always made time for Keira. They were deliriously happy for most of the year in their wilderness kingdom. It was only over the last few months that things started to go wrong between them. Keira knew *she* was to blame for

that, but she couldn't help it as some of the old doubts returned to plague her. They should be married by now, she thought uneasily. Why weren't they? She had quickly found out that there was a preacher at Fort Chipewyan, the North West post on Lake Athabasca which they often visited, and where the stigma of being Luc's "country" wife could readily be wiped away. Yet never once had he mentioned marriage!

The strain inevitably took its toll and they started to quarrel, explosive, passionate squabbles over nothing, fights that usually ended up in bed. But they had a more serious confrontation during the time of the big annual conclave at Fort Chipewyan, where everyone converged to talk business, make policy, and when that was done, enjoy themselves. There were lavish banquets, hunting and fishing parties, ballsto which the local Indian women were invitedand other entertainments, the more bizarre the better. The Indians too had their revels. Alcohol was a big feature of both.

Neither Luc nor Keira were particularly keen on joining the festivities, but Luc had to attend for business reasons. Later they were compelled to stay on as guests at the final dinner party. The guest of honor was Ralph Kirkland, a North West director visiting the fort from their Montreal headquarters.

Luc and Keira arrived at Fort Chipewyan on a Friday. That night they were kept awake by a dreadful racket coming from the Indian encampment near the lake. At one point Keira jumped out of bed and ran to the window of their room on the second floor of the building and was horrified to see many of the tipis ablaze, with figures flying around waving flaming torches and brandishing what looked like axes and other weapons. The bellowing, screaming, and outlandish singing made Keira's blood run cold, but Luc ordered her back to bed, saying, "That's their idea of

fun, even if it isn't ours, and there's nothing we can do about it."

Next morning they learned that an Indian had been hacked to death at the encampment. The clerk who told them shrugged. "That's nothing new. You know how they are when under the influence."

The murder was a topic of discussion that night at the dinner party, and though the culprit had been arrested and tossed into the fort jail, the general reaction to the crime was indifference. Kirkland, the guest of honor, a handsome silver-haired man in his late forties with

lecherous eyes and a careless charm, even laughed about it a little. "Savages are savages," he remarked with a shrug. "What else can one expect? When I stopped at Fort William on my way down here, one of the brutes had just been arrested for stabbing his wife after one of their shindigs. It's just the nature of the beast."

Keira gave the director a cold stare. From the time she had entered the room in her wine-red ballgown, a dress Luc had had made for her in Montreal and sent on to them in time for her twentieth birthday, Kirkland had hardly taken his eyes off her. Over drinks before dinner he had managed to touch Keira more times than she cared to count, and some of the comments he had whispered to her had bordered on the suggestive, especially when he discovered that she and Luc were not actually married to each other, remarks that would have had Luc reaching for his sword if he could have heard them. Keira had done her best to keep out of his way and ignore him, but now, as they sat at table, she suddenly found that she couldn't ignore Kirkland's ignorant remarks any longer.

"The Indians aren't the only ones who turn into beasts when under the influence of alcohol," she said.

Thirty-five people stared at her in surprise, then

Kirkland and several others laughed, seeming to take it as a joke.

Keira's face flushed with anger. "There's nothing amusing about murder that I can see," she snapped.

They stopped laughing, all except Kirkland who gazed at Keira with a patronizing smile. "No, of course there isn't, my dear. We are all dreadfully shocked." He might have been talking to a child. "But, my lovely girl, these people are heathens, uncivilized barbarians. They have no sense of decency"

"I disagree," she interrupted icily, thinking of the Indian families around Fort Arrowhead, most of whom had much the same feelings for each other as the whites, even if they did do things differently. "Alcohol is to blame for these crimes," she went on, not caring that they were all gaping at her now and that the room had become very quiet. "And who supplies them with the alcohol?"

"It's the only way they will trade," one of the wintering partners chimed in, anxious to smooth over the awkwardness. "We don't force it on them. In actual fact, we offer a wide range of other items in

payment for their pelts and the choice is up to them. Let's be honest, they've been addicted to alcohol for years"he glanced up and down the table for affirmation, and many heads nodded agreement"so the present situation can hardly be blamed on us."

"Perhaps not," Keira replied, "but you could put a stop to it by not using liquor in the bargaining process." Her eyes appealed to them. "You've all seen what it does to them, how it's destroying their tribal life, their culture. You might not have started it, it's true, but if you've any decency in you then you have a responsibility to stamp it out!"

Kirkland laughed, and with a glance up and down the table said, "Well! That certainly puts us in our place. And by a pretty little snip of a thing too." He

looked across the table at Keira, and though he was still smiling, his eyes were cold. "From what I gather, you yourself are quite happy enjoying all the benefits of the fur trade and country living"his eyes flicked to Luc"a mode of living that might not be quite so acceptable in town"

Luc banged down his glass, snapping the stem. To Keira's horror he leaned over the table and seized the older man by his shirt front and growled into his startled face; "Keira has a right to her own opinion. And whether she does or doesn't benefit from the fur trade is no business of yours. As to *how* we live" his lip curled in a sneer "you should look to your own mode of living, Kirkland. I understand that your native wife has just given birth again. How many children do you have now? Six? Seven? I'm curious about something: have they met their white brothers and sisters in Montreal? Have your two wives become acquainted over afternoon tea? Who will pour, I wonder," Luc went on relentlessly, his voice dripping with sarcasm, his dark eyes brilliant with anger. Then, while everyone held their breaths, he hurled Kirkland back in his chair so hard that it toppled over, sending the North West director sprawling on the floor.

"Never speak to Keira like that again," Luc warned him, his voice deadly quiet, "unless you relish answering to me over steel."

For a moment there wasn't a sound in the room and nobody moved, then Kirkland picked himself up and scurried to the door, his dignity in tatters. There he turned, face white, foaming at the mouth. "You'll regret this, Duval!" he gasped. "I'll ruin you, yes, if it's the last thing I do. McTavish and the others will hear about this when I return to

Montreal"

When Luc again rose from his chair, Kirkland bolted from the room.

Luc might have stood up for her in front of the

others, but he was livid with Keira once he had her alone. "Do you think we're living in Shangri-la?" he asked her, his expression hard. "Or fairyland, perhaps? Have you learned nothing in all your travels about this country? I suppose you think we enjoy traveling thousands of miles through ice and snow, or dust and heat, and battling with the Indians, sometimes losing our scalps, all in the name of doing business only to return at the end of it empty-handed when the Indians refuse to sell us their pelts unless we supply them with the product they want in exchange."

Keira looked away. "I'm sorry about tonight, but"

"It's time you grew up and faced reality!" he shouted. "The world, especially the world of the fur trader, is a harsh place. You should know that by now. Lofty principles and high ideals have no place here, much as we might wish otherwise, and neither you or anyone else will ever be able to mold it into the paradise you'd like it to be, so don't waste your time trying."

"I don't consider it a waste of time," Keira replied stiffly, beginning to get angry at the way he was shouting at her. "You, Luc Duval, are a cynic and just as ruthless as all the rest!"

"I wouldn't be alive today if I thought as you do," he retorted.

They didn't speak to each other for three days after that particular fight.

And that was just it, they *did* think differently about so many things. When Keira had first broached the idea of starting her little school, teaching the Indian children what she could, passing along some of the things Jasper Rawson was teaching her, Luc had been amused at first, though tolerant but Keira could tell that secretly he thought it was a waste of time. Keira

disagreed. Many of the Chipewyans around the fort had picked up quite a lot of English, particularly the children, and she felt that a little education would profit them especially when dealing with the fur

barons, who by this time Keira felt were a rapacious crew. Against them the tribes needed all the help they could muster.

Then too, when she had the bright idea of involving some of the Indian women in a little business venture of their own, Luc had been genuinely startled. "What on earth do they know about business?" he'd laughed. "And come to think of it, what do you?"

"Oh, I've learned quite a bit watching you and the others in the fur trade," Keira had responded tartly. "At least it has taught me what to guard against, if nothing else."

"Thank you." He had looked and sounded hurt.

And, of course, Keira had immediately melted and thrown her arms around him, soothing, "Oh, you are the cleverest, most enterprising man I've ever known, and I'm hoping to be able to draw on all your experience and wisdom for advice. How can we fail with Luc Duval behind us?" And she'd smiled at him hopefully.

"Well," he said, still seeming dubious, "at least it will keep you out of mischief while I'm so busy."

Keira had cuffed his ear.

It was a real challenge trying to gentle and civilize Luc Duval, the most complex, exasperating man she had ever met but also the most stimulating and exciting. So Keira had gone ahead with her business plans, taking over one of the rooms in the fort, even having a sign made for the door that read: Chipewyan Products. All the men had been highly amused at that.

Geese, fresh or dried, was a staple in the Indian diet, but usually the downy feathers were discarded, and these feathers were exceptionally soft and warm.

Noticing that some of the Indians used them to stuff and pad their winter garments and blankets and winters in Athabasca were frigid, Keira felt they might also have a market elsewhere. The garments they made were unusual and attractive, decorated with beautiful designs picked out with beads, embroidery, feathers, and dyed strips of fringed leather. For less daring customers they could fashion plainer attire but still filled with the cozy feathers for warmth, she reasoned, getting really excited about the idea.

Through Luc and Jasper Rawson, Keira made contact with firms in Montreal, New York, Paris, and London. They all showed interest in her products, and were willing to try them out on their customers and with that Chipewyan Products was launched into business, all profits channeled into a fund for the Chipewyans. In an incredibly short time the company was producing attractive winter attire, quilts, pillows, and anything else they could think of to stuff with goose feathers and those from the eider duck. Almost at once there were spinoffs that also found markets: quills, whale oil from the Eskimos near the Copper-mine River, pottery, and carved goods made from bone.

Soon there were thirty Indian women in Keira's little factory, working with enthusiasm, laughing and chattering all the while. Chipewyan Products was a happy place to be, and before long they had many visitors stopping by to inspect their wares and enjoy a cup of tea or coffee in the ebullient atmosphere, most seeming to be truly astounded at their success, not least Luc himself. By then they had taken over two rooms in Fort Arrowhead, and one day he remarked ruefully, "By this time next year I'll be in want of a place to live, the way you are going."

"Then you'll just have to build me a fort of my own!" laughed Keira, only half-joking.

She had found plenty to do during the year they had been at Fort Arrowhead, with Luc so involved with his own business, her various enterprises had proved to be a godsend, and, Keira had to admit, both Luc and Jasper Rawson had given her all the help they could; she could not have done it without them.

The school and the business had helped to distract Keira from her own personal problems and left her little time to brood about them.

For six months after she left Helsingor her monthly flow had not appeared, though Keira knew she couldn't possibly be pregnant, and after much thought concluded that her traumatic experience at the hands of Seth Bratchy had somehow shocked her system. Much the same thing had happened to her around the time she left Scotland. Ever since, her flow had been sporadic, at least until lately. Now that her body seemed to have adjusted and settled down, Keira knew that the possibility of pregnancy had increased, and she had mixed feelings about that, increasingly uncertain as she was about the situation between Luc and herself.

She had never told him about the lost baby. Somehow or other, the right moment had never come. In the beginning Keira had been loath to sadden him, and subsequently they had been so busy, with Luc forging ahead in his business to make up for all the time he had lost, and with the passage of time it became that much more difficult; she was afraid that he might think this was her way of trying to make him feel guilty, to exert a hold over him . . . and delay followed delay. Now, with them fighting so much, Keira was afraid to break the news, certain Luc would not understand why she had waited so long to tell him something so important to both of them. Oh . . . she was in a lather of indecision, not sure of the best way to handle it. In the end she did nothing. Safer that

way, she thought judiciously.

In two weeks they would return to Montreal where they would spend the winter and the following spring. When Keira wondered aloud about what would happen to her school and Chipewyan Products while they were away, Luc had replied impatiently, "Put somebody else in charge. It's time you started delegating authority." Then he said, "Dena is a likely lady. She speaks good English and is very bright and organized. She's always managed to handle her housekeeping duties very well during the times I've been away, and is already a great asset to you in the business."

Dena . . . Sweetwater's beautiful sister, the daughter of the local chief.

At that suggestion Keira had searched Luc's face, to find his expression unfathomable. Even so, a painful clutch of jealousy gripped her heart. Dena was madly in love with Luc and not subtle enough to hide it. The nineteen-year-old beauty had been at Fort Arrowhead long before she, Keira, had come on the scene, taking over the duties of her older sister, Sweetwater, and insecure as she was Keira had often wondered if her duties had included a lot more than taking care of Luc's house. Though the Indian girl was always polite and obliging, Keira sensed that Dena resented her understandable, she supposed, considering how she felt about Luc.

So her response to Luc's suggestion was sharp. "It's *my* business and *I'll* decide who should be left in control while we're gone."

Luc bowed slightly, a faint, inscrutable smile hovering about his mouth. "Of course." But he added maddeningly, "It just seemed to me that Dena is the obvious choice, assuming you want the business to

prosper while we're in Montreal."

Keira almost blurted then, "Yes, and I'll *stay* in Montreal unless certain things are made clear between

us," but clamped her lips tight just in time. It was getting more and more difficult to keep silent on the subject closest to her heart, the question of what was to become of them as a couple. The longer Luc kept silent, the more hurt and resentful Keira became, and the more fearful. Daily she told herself that she had no intention of remaining his "country" wife forever, but nightly, in his arms, with his lips against her ear whispering how much he loved her, Keira's resolve to have it out would weaken. Be patient, she warned herself, just a little while longer. Luc Duval was not the sort of man who could be coerced into anything, and at that time his mind was all on business, and with good reason.

The trade war between the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West was escalating rapidly, with serious repercussions for Luc's own firm. Several times over the past few months Indians on their way to Fort Arrowhead to sell their pelts' had been intercepted by men from the Bay, who threatened to shoot any Indian who supplied companies other than themselves. Lethal battles took place between the rivals in the wilderness, with men killed on either side and forts sacked and burned. Canoe brigades were regularly blasted out of the water.

Both sides in the conflict behaved like rabid dogs as they fought to control the market, and anyone who got between them was promptly crushed. Once on top in the fur trade, the Hudson's Bay Company were now the underdogs and fighting desperately for survival, and as Luc knew, a desperate animal was always the most unpredictable and dangerous. Laws passed in faraway London were ignored in the wilds, and both companies stopped at nothing to get the upper hand, the aim of each to put the other permanently out of business.

The first casualties in the trade war were the inde-

pendents. Monthly, more and more were wiped out. Luc saw the way the wind was blowing and took steps to protect himself. His strength lay in his ability to adapt to changing circumstances, in never blinding himself to the obvious, regardless of how unpalatable. He felt that with skillful maneuvering he could continue for several years on his own, but eventually, as he saw it, one of the major firms was destined to monopolize the fur trade. He wanted a stake in that firm, even

while branching out in other directions on his own. With some of his profits he had bought property in Paris, London and New York, and was already a partner in one of the largest furriers in Paris.

During the recent North West conclave at Fort Chipewyan Luc had again broached the idea of the two major companies amalgamating, since the trade war was damaging both sides. When that idea met with stony resistance, Luc suggested that the North West directors immediately raise the necessary cash to buy out their competitor. "The Bay people might be tottering," he said, "but they still have one vital advantage over yourselves, and that is their vastly superior position for shipping pelts back to Europe. Where it takes you five months to get your furs to the London auctions, they can do it in eight weeks from the Bay, and you all know the exorbitant cost of the extra time. I would urge you to discuss amalgamation while you are still in a strong position," he went on forcefully. "Now that the Bay people are branching out into your own territory, I'm afraid that it doesn't bode well for the future of the North West Company."

Luc was listened to politely but his advice was rejected. Riding high as they were and with the lion's share of the market, the North West partners felt certain that they had nothing to fear. Kirkland commented with a complacent smile, "But, Duval, the beast is on its last legs now; all we need do is wait for it

to draw its last breath. Why should we make a deal with a sick old man, as it were? Why not save our money for the big celebration that will follow when the old fellow finally passes into oblivion?" he finished with a laugh.

"Don't buy the champagne yet," was Duval's terse response.

Keira was startled when Luc announced one night at dinner that he had made arrangements to buy shares in the Hudson's Bay Company. She stared at him as if he had lost his mind. "My God, why on earth would you put good money in a firm that's floundering?" she asked him.

"As an investment for the future"

"The future!" she scoffed. "It's doubtful that the Hudson's Bay Company *has* a future, and no wonder, considering the senile old men running the company from London. Oh Luc . . . I think you've made a dreadful mistake."

But he didn't seem in the least concerned.

"My contacts in London have got wind of a reshuffling taking place on their governing committee, with many of these senile old men scheduled to be weeded out," Luc replied with a grin. "And once dynamic new blood is brought in, you'll see a dramatic change in the organization. They finally realize that this isn't a game for fine gentlemen"

"Now, that is certainly true!" Keira broke in cynically, her expression severe. "I still think you've made a mistake buying into the Hudson's Bay. Company, and can't imagine how they can possibly come out on top."

"Wait and see."

Keira looked at him quickly, probingly, wondering if they would still be together when and if that happened. Would Luc be able to turn to her and say, "I told you so!" Or . . . would they be far apart by

then? Keira dropped her eyes to the ring sparkling on her right hand, her mind going back to the day Luc had given it to her at Fort William, and the words he'd said as he slipped it on her finger. "A token of my love for you." And he *did* love her! Yes, in spite of their constant bickering, Luc demonstrated that love every day and surely, Keira told herself fervently, it was enough? They were as good as husband and wife now. What difference would a piece of paper make? But even as she tried to convince herself that a legal marriage document was a mere formality and not necessary to them, Keira did not believe it in her heart. She could not forget her bitter experience in Scotland, when her people had been evicted from the land they and their ancestors had occupied for centuries because they'd had no legal title to that land. Even if she didn't care for herself, there was the question of children to consider.

"You've grown very quiet," said Luc, breaking into her thoughts.

Keira raised her head and their eyes met in the candlelight. For an instant she tried to view him coolly, as a stranger might; tried to find flaws, wondering if she could be blinding herself; if the love she felt for him might be clouding her judgment, leading her to believe things that simply weren't true.

Luc smiled at her quizzically, wondering at her sudden silence and why she was frowning. His teeth gleamed very white against the deep

bronze of his skin, his strong features and the lazy, sensual expression in his eyes enough to addle the wits of any women. He was such a handsome man, Keira thought, appraising him and trying to remain detached, the sort of man who could melt you with a glance and make you feel acutely conscious of his masculinity, arousing feelings of excitement and desire. And it wasn't just her; she had noticed that he affected other

women in exactly the same way, from Dena to twittery Ellen Milton at Fort William. Suddenly Keira found herself dreading the social scene in Montreal; dreaded going there with Luc while the situation between them was so tenuous and indeterminate.

After a minute Luc reached across the table and took her hand.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked her.

Keira hesitated, then admitted, "Us," suddenly tired of skirting the issue.

His own face sobered and he felt a slight irritation. Luc had sensed a growing dissatisfaction in Keira over the last few months, and the way he saw it, she had nothing to be dissatisfied about. He saw to it that she lacked for nothing. Further, he backed up her many business schemes, or any idea and interest she had that would keep her stimulated and happy. Though he had been heavily involved in his own business since coming to Athabasca, he had never neglected her. And not a single day went by without him telling her that he loved her.

Now, seeing her frown, Luc was annoyed. He rose suddenly, his face a bit tight, walked around the table, and drew back her chair. Keira glanced at him questioningly as she stood up. "I hadn't quite finished."

But he took her by the arm and hurried her out of the dining room without a word of apology or explanation. She could tell by the intent expression on his face that he meant to take her back to their room and make love to her, as he had often done lately to avoid serious personal discussions. It was as if Luc felt that the very act of love itself could obliterate all their differences and reaffirm what they really meant to each other without the need for words, and usually he was right.

But not that night.

The moment they were in the privacy of their room Luc pulled her into his arms and crushed his mouth to hers, one hand in her hair, the other at her hips holding her tight against his hardness. Recently, Keira had noticed, there was an element of conquest about the way Luc made love to her, and that night his manner was the same, masterful rather than tender. Normally this excited Keira; now she felt nothing but indignation as Luc impatiently stripped her naked, then threw off his own things, and taking her by the arms, drew her down beside him on the bed.

Even then, as his lips claimed hers and he began to caress her, things might have gone on as usual had not Luc made the mistake of saying, "When you think of us I don't want to see you frown, as you did a few minutes ago in the dining room." He lifted Keira's face to his and she saw that he was annoyed. "Good God, what do you have to frown about? We're in love and very happy together. There's nothing in the world

that we lack that *you* lack. Most women would be blissfully content to be in your position, especially" he gave her one of his devilish white smiles "when they live with a man who can never get enough of them."

He looked so sure of her, and so supremely confident of his ability to charm her and have her see things his way that it angered Keira. "Lovemaking isn't the solution to everything," she snapped, "as you seem to think. There are certain things that a couple must talk about."

The second the words were out, Keira felt a tingling apprehension at broaching a subject that her instincts had warned her never to raise. Duval, as she well knew, was not a man who could be pushed into anything. How would he react, she fretted nervously, if she demanded to know his intentions?

But all he did was chuckle and say, "My darling, we talk all the time!" He glanced down at himself, adding, "And at the moment I think conversation will have to wait." Then he took her hand and placed it on his thigh, at the same time leaning forward to touch his tongue to her nipples.

Keira's anger and resentment came bounding back and she jerked away, a wildness and defiance, a disregard for the consequences taking hold of her. She sat up and swung her legs over the side of the

bed. "It's lovemaking that will have to wait. Youyou are just not interested in what I have to say. You never listen to me, not really." Her voice cracked and tears rushed into her eyes. "What do you care about my feelings? Can you not understand how mortified I was when Ralph Kirkland made that comment about our mode of living"

Luc laughed harshly, drowning her out. "Kirkland is a hypocrite. He's the last one who should be criticizing others, and you are a fool if you take his

comments to heart."

"Yes . . ." Keira nodded, ". . . I am a fool . . ."

Propping himself up on an elbow, Luc regarded her stony profile in exasperation. He had an impulse to drag her back down beside him and overwhelm her with the force of his love or take her by the shoulders and shake the silly notions out of her head. After a tense silence he sat up, and ignoring Keira's resistance, lifted her onto his lap so that she sat facing him with her legs straddling his body. Then Luc smiled wickedly into her eyes. "Well, if we *must* talk at least we can do so in comfort."

Her face blazed with anger and Keira felt like slapping him. "How can we carry on a serious conversation like this?" she protested, at the same time acutely conscious of the hard heat of him thrusting against her own flesh, and the way her senses responded as Luc held her close. "Let me go!" Keira cried, and arched back determined to fight him, willing herself to resist him for once.

Luc bent forward swiftly and his hungry mouth closed over her left breast, his tongue, hot and moist, rasping back and forth across her nipple until it popped up erect and eager in his mouth. At the same time he moved slightly against her, his flesh parting hers, until she felt a delicious friction brush the sensitive area in the velvety folds between her legs. Immediately a sharp thrill shot through her and a great weakening sapped her resolve. The angry thoughts in her mind cracked and splintered and floated away into a misty void as a primitive urge made her want to rearrange herself in such a way that contact with him was more direct an impulse she checked just in time.

"Beast!" Keira gasped, and grasping him by his muscular shoulders she tried to push him away. Struggling, she managed to get her knees on the bed

and raised herself up off his lap, but Luc's hands tightened on her buttocks and pulled her back down on top of him and with a moan Keira felt him thrust deeply inside her, a look of triumph on his face. Then his fingers were in her hair, his lips feverishly ravishing her mouth, her ears, her throat, his free hand at her breast and his thumb teasing the nipple.

There was nothing she could do. Luc completely overwhelmed her. He knew well how to arouse her, how to bring that piercing pleasure, strumming her sensitive nerve endings until every cell in her body shrieked for release. That night, perhaps to punish Keira for making him wait, he prolonged the ecstatic moment until she thought she would lose her mind. At first she didn't notice as she returned his kisses with rising passion, her hands fluttering over the bulging muscles at his shoulders, shuddering down over the smooth tanned skin of his back, clutching at his thighs, frantically trying to draw him closer.

Each time Keira tried to move above him, Luc caught her hips and held her still. "Not yet," he told her hoarsely, his lips against her ear, the tip of his tongue exploring the delicate whorls, making her shiver deliciously. Then he seized her mouth and thrust his tongue inside, touching hers, moving in a way that made Keira's yearning body ache and again she tried to push against him, maddened when Luc continued to hold her still.

Keira threw back her head and looked at him, puzzled. "Why what are you doing?" she asked breathlessly, her fingers digging into his shoulders, her features strained, needy, but so very lovely to the man watching her. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes smoky, a little glazed, and her bright hair cascaded in charming disarray around her face and over her shoulders. Luc smiled into her eyes, then his gaze lowered to her full white breasts, the nipples stiff and

dusky-red, swollen and ripe from the attention he had paid them. He stared at her slender white thighs spread wide around the tautness of his own darkly tanned body. They were quivering, Luc noticed, clutching at him spasmodically as were her interior muscles opening and closing around his swelling need.

It took every ounce of Luc's strength to make himself hold still.

"You wanted to talk to me, did you not?"

"What . . . ?" Keira stared at him as if he had gone mad.

"You insisted that we have a discussion before we made love," Luc reminded her, watching her closely, noting that Keira looked feverish and a little frantic, that she trembled and twitched as he ran his fingers leisurely down her back, over her hips, and inward to the spot where they were joined. "I won't have you accusing me of not listening," he said, his fingers moving up the front of her body now, stroking her stomach which was tight and hard tracing her ribcage, rising slowly over the warm white globes to the hard little peaks.

"Oh!" The word was torn from Keira as Luc toyed with her nipples. She darted forward and mindlessly ground her mouth to his, moaning as she felt Luc's hand slip between her legs, part her, then caress her throbbing flesh with a touch that was whisper-soft, a touch that both thrilled and tortured Keira and sent lightning flashes of fire searing through her body. But after a moment or two he withdrew his hand, taking the rapture away.

"Oh no, no!" Keira gripped his hand and thrust it back against her. She crushed herself to him, winding her arms tight around his waist, aching, quivering with a desire so fierce that she almost screamed aloud with impatience. She was long past the stage of rational thought and the words came bursting out of

her in response to the frenzied hunger inside her. "We can't talk now! Not now!"

Luc grasped her by the arms and held her away from him. "Then what do you want? Make up your mind."

"Love me," she breathed, her skin burning hot under his hands, her face so glowing with passion, so seductive, so beautiful to Luc at that moment as her eyes brimmed with love for him that he felt deeply touched. "Keira," he said, "I will love you now and always"

"Yes," she cried. "Yes!"

"Listen to me." Luc took her face between his hands and gazed deep into her eyes. "You must never question my feelings for you, because that hurts me very much. Why should we care what others say? You must not allow the opinions of outsiders to get between the love we feel for each other."

"I won't," she agreed at once. "I promise."

He kissed her then and released his grip on her hips.

Luc began to move, slowly at first, but with each hard thrust the smoldering fire in each of them was rapidly fanned to a blazing inferno. Keira felt a tingling begin deep inside her, bursting suddenly like a flower opening in the heat of the sun, sending pulsing waves of ecstasy radiating through her body, over and over again, so intense that she ended up limp and drained, sobbing in his arms.

"Oh, my sweet darling!" Keira cried in a flood of emotion. "I love you so much. And I *don't* ever question the feelings we have for each other. You must never think that, Luc."

That was quite true. It wasn't his love that she questioned but where it would lead them! But that seemed inconsequential while Keira lay warm and contented in Luc's arms, his cheek against her hair, his hand on her breast. Then she made excuses for

him. He had been working so hard. He had much to worry him and she'd noticed that often Luc seemed troubled and preoccupied considering the uncertain state of the fur trade. Why, she thought, he could not even be certain that his own company would survive. And she expected him to think of marriage at such a time! Keira was ashamed of her own selfish impatience.

But the following day, when she was in a cooler mood, things looked a little different to her.

All year Keira had labored to write down her life story, working it over constantly to make sure she had everything right, and a few days ago she had given it to Jasper Rawson to read. By now Jasper had become her dear friend, even her mentor, and Keira trusted his judgment implicitly and knew that she could trust him to keep her journal confidential. Naturally, there was much about Luc in the journal, though to spare Jasper and anyone else who might eventually read it embarrassment, Keira had been very circumspect about how she expressed her feelings for Luc.

But the deep love she felt for him came shining through. Jasper, in reading the manuscript, had been very moved, and not only about her sad experiences in Scotland and the fear and suffering she had endured when she first arrived in North America. The journal, as he saw it, was a testament to love itself, for family, country, even nature . . . but especially for Luc Duval.

Rawson had always admired and respected Duval and liked him greatly, but after reading Keira's journal he was left tight with anger at

his boss. Not that Keira had spoken a single word against him. On the contrary, she had written so glowingly about the man that Jasper knew Luc would be embarrassed if he read it. But . . . Keira's uncertainty had come through very clearly, and *that* was what angered Jasper Rawson.

Surely, he thought, she deserved much better than that!

Like Maurice and a few of the older voyageurs, Rawson knew about Luc's betrothal to Clarise Menard. He also knew that Keira had been kept in the dark about the engagement. That Duval loved his Scottish mistress was obvious to them all but then many of the fur barons loved their Indian mistresses, even while they had no intention of marrying them.

Nobody, not even him, dared question Duval about his intentions, and Luc never discussed his personal life with others. They had heard, though, that Clarise Menard was ill; Luc himself had mentioned that he intended making a brief trip to Paris from Montreal, without explaining why, though he did ask Jasper to say nothing about it to Keira. "I'll tell her later," he said, when Rawson gave him a probing look, "nearer the time."

This told Jasper that he didn't intend to take Keira with him.

Now, setting the journal aside, Rawson shuddered to think how Keira would feel if Luc returned to Canada with a wife. Duval prided himself on being a man who never went back on his word, and the Frenchwoman had waited for him for a long time. The picture was clear. Duval would go through with his promise and marry Clarise Menard and make her his official wife. Keira, like so many others, would be kept hidden in the background as his wife à la façon du pays, her home this lonely fort they were in now, the best years of her life spent in isolation.

Jasper slapped his hands on the table. "If he weds the Frenchwoman," he said aloud, "I shall resign from his service."

He went to Keira then and lavishly praised her journal, so much so that she stared at him in surprise. Luc's manager never minced words and could be

counted on to speak the blunt truth, even at the risk of injuring sensitive feelings. Keira knew herself that her manuscript was very

rough and amateurishly written, and that her spelling and grammar were poor. The journal still needed a tremendous amount of work before she could think of letting a publisher see it she wouldn't even allow Luc to see it in this state.

But Jasper gushed, "Just a little more polishing and it will be perfect. Naturally, I shall help you with that. You really do have a knack for telling a rousing tale, Keira, and it's good, really, for a woman to have something of her own to fall back on."

Then he did something else totally out of character he hugged her.

When they drew apart he said, "Between us we'll see to it that this is published." He sounded, thought Keira, almost grim. "Then you'll be independent in your own right. You might even decide to go back to Scotland and buy one of those castles you wrote about in your journal," he went on with a brittle laugh, "much as some of the fur barons have done. That will show him" He broke off suddenly, appalled.

Keira frowned. "Show who? What are you talking about, Jasper?"

"Oh . . ." he said, his face beet-red, ". . . show men like the Earl of Strathvagan, of course. That's who I meant."

She studied him in silence for a moment, thinking that he was acting so strange and seemed upset and angry about something. "Jasper, is anything wrong?"

"No. No, of course not."

"I wonder how Luc will like my story?" she said softly.

His eyes flared. "Duval is no literary expert," Rawson replied sharply. "And whether he likes it or not this book will be published." Bristling at the injustices he suspected that Luc was soon to perpe-

trate against Keira a woman whom Rawson suddenly knew that he loved he added rashly, "You must look to your *own* future, Keira. I cannot stress that enough. We will revise the manuscript, you and I, and as soon as we reach Montreal we will present it to a publisher . . ." He broke off then, realizing by the expression on her face that he might have gone too far. But suddenly Jasper didn't care. It was imperative that Keira be made to understand that she could not count on Duval or depend on him for her future security.

She gazed at him, perplexed, everything Jasper had just said to her running like a dark river through her mind. It was good, he'd said, for a woman to have something of her own to fall back on; that she should look to her own future. In other words . . .

"Jasper . . ." she whispered, ". . . what is it?"

There was a moment when he almost told her; when he came close to saying, "He is going to marry another woman. You he plans to keep as his mistress, tucked away in the backcountry," but swallowed down his ire just in time. He had to get out of her room at once! Jasper had never been as angry and outraged in his life. So he hurried to the door, calling back over his shoulder, "I have work to do, but don't forget what I told you. You must let nothing stop you from trying to have your book published. Put that first in your life."

Put that first in her life . . . ?

Once he left, Keira gazed at the closed door, a chill feeling of foreboding stealing over her. Luc took first place in her life! Yes, and Jasper knew that quite well. Yet he was asking her, practically beseeching her, to put a book ahead of the man she loved. What on earth had gotten into Jasper Rawson? Never had Keira seen the usually cool, sensible Jasper behaving in such an

irrational way, warning her that it was time to consider her future.

Something had happened to Luc!

Why else would Rawson be acting this way?

"Oh, God!" she choked. "Oh, please . . . no!"

Keira jumped up from her chair at the desk, flew to the door, and within minutes barged into one of the warehouses, where she found Luc, hale and hearty, with several of his men. Ignoring them, she ran up to him and grasped him by the arms, crying, "Are you all right? Has something happened?"

Luc led her outside where they could have some privacy and they stood together in the brilliant August sunshine. "What's all this about, Keira?" he asked curiously. Her face was unnaturally pale.

She told him about Jasper's odd behavior, how it had left her with the fear that something might have happened to him. Luc's face tightened

and he seemed a bit annoyed, then his shoulders relaxed and he grinned. "Blame his mother," he chuckled. "Rawson *always* gets edgy before we return to civilization. His mother is a very domineering woman and he's probably bracing himself for the reunion."

Keira smiled uncertainly, though she failed to see what Jasper's mother had to do with him urging *her* to start thinking seriously about her future. Luc gave her a quick kiss, saying, "Don't let him bother you. He gets these moments occasionally. Pay no attention."

She nodded and returned to the house, but Keira had a few qualms herself about returning to civilization where her relationship with Luc would certainly not be viewed as tolerantly as it was out here in the wilderness. Far from it! It was easy for Luc to spurn the opinions of others, she thought with a stab of vexation. It was always the woman who bore the brunt of public condemnation in these affairs, and whose

reputation was ruined. Suddenly Keira dreaded the thought of returning to Montreal, at which point she and Luc would have gone full circle. Full circle . . . somehow those two words had an ominous ring, signaling the conclusion of something.

By the time Keira reached their bedchamber she was in a tense state of inner agitation. When she closed the door the silent room rushed in on her and all the doubts and misgivings she'd ever had would no longer be placated or held back. Leaning against the door, she closed her eyes, wondering what on earth had given Jasper Rawson the idea that she would ever return to Scotland whether she sold her story or not. He knew, surely, that she intended staying with Luc, hopefully marrying him . . .

But Luc had never mentioned marriage! He never talked about their future together. And he had asked her never to question their love, their relationship, distracting her with lovemaking the few times Keira had tried to bring it up.

He had no intention of marrying her! And . . . Rawson knew that and felt sorry for her.

"No!" Keira whimpered. "Oh, no . . . never. Dear God, Luc loves me!"

Of course, as she had already witnessed for herself, love didn't necessarily lead to marriage. It could take other routes, such as a couple living in a sham marriage "in the country way," a practice all

too common in the fur trade.

Keira tottered blindly to the bed and fell on it face-down, grinding her forehead into the cover. From the past she heard François's voice saying mockingly, "You just his country wife. He got woman in Paris. Everybody know . . ."

Including, naturally, Jasper Rawson. And Jasper had been trying to tell her something when he'd said that it was good for a woman to have something "to

fall back on"; that it was wise for her to be independent. "That will show him," he'd said. Keira knew now that Jasper hadn't been referring to the Earl of Strathvagan, but Luc Duval.

A convulsive sob tore at her throat, and even yet, with all the evidence pointing to the truth of it, Keira tried to convince herself that it wasn't true, that Luc thought too much of her to expect her to continue to live in an illicit relationship. But on the other hand she also knew that Luc was ruthlessly ambitious, the type of man who organized his life to suit himself, and who could not be swayed away from the course he had set himself a course he'd had all planned out long before she had met him.

Keira was seized with an impulse to run back to the warehouse and confront him, to demand the truth at last. Instead she began to weep brokenly, clawing at the cover, beating her head against the bed. She couldn't bear it! She loved him so much . . . *too* much. Luc knew that and had taken full advantage of it.

She cried until she was drained, then got up and began to pace the room. What was she going to do? she asked herself. How could she possibly live without him? Of course, a little voice whispered, she *needn't* live without him, not if she could resign herself to the situation as it was now, and continue to be "sa femme à la façon du pays."

Keira sat up abruptly, her expression devastated.

"Never!" she whispered fiercely. "Never!"

She had too much pride, too much self-respect, and neither Luc Duval nor anyone else would ever be allowed to take that away from her. The only reason she was living with him now was because she had trusted him to do the honorable thing and marry her when he could. She had made excuses for the delay, even berating herself for being

impatient. Now she

knew the *real* reason for the delay and could blind herself to the truth no longer.

Keira almost hated him at that moment, and anger gave her strength. She got up and bathed her swollen face in the washbasin. She dragged a comb through her hair, straightened her clothes, then leaned forward to stare grimly at her white face in the mirror. "Now you must be hard," she told herself. "You must be as hard and unfeeling as he is. You never really knew him, and saw only what you wanted to see, and it was all just a pretty illusion."

Before dinner Keira bathed and took great care with her toilet, selecting one of her loveliest gowns, Luc's favorite. It was of turquoise satin with a snug-fitting bodice and dipping neckline. The jewel-like color gave her eyes a faint greenish hue and emphasized the bright reddish-gold of her hair.

Fortunately, they had a guest that night at dinner, a factor from Fort Chipewyan. Jamieson had ridden down to visit them with some startling and unwelcome news. They had just heard, he said, that a Scottish earl, a Lord Selkirk, had bought a large number of shares in the Hudson's Bay Company, as had Selkirk's family and friends, and if steps weren't taken to stop them they would soon hold a controlling interest in the company. "And that's not the worst of it," their guest went on gloomily. "This Selkirk seems to be a bit of a philanthropist. He's trying to get a huge land grant from the HBC with the aim to colonize the Northwest, starting with the Red River Valley region. And dear God, you know how *that* will affect our best fur-bearing territory. When people move into an area, the animals leave." He took a gulp of his brandy and continued, "His lordship has a great deal of money and connections all the way to the top. He'll be a very hard man to stop, though perhaps," he sighed, "I'm overreacting."

"Well," Luc said, "you already know how I would handle the HBC. My views haven't changed. You could forestall Selkirk by raising the capital yourselves to buy a controlling interest"

"We are seriously thinking about it."

"Then don't think too long," Luc warned. "From the looks of it, you have no time to waste. Should Selkirk be given a land grant of any size it will destroy your company."

Jamieson dabbed at his sweating face. "You won't believe this, Duval, but I've heard that the figure he's after is somewhere in the nature of fifty million acres, much of it in prime fur land. Of course it hasn't been accepted by the board yet and might never be, we dare to hope."

That night at Fort Arrowhead they discussed steps to block Selkirk's plans, namely that the NWC should move as soon as possible to purchase all the stock they could. "I think McGillivray is finally coming around to your way of thinking," said Jamieson, "though some of the partners still feel that we have nothing to worry about, considering that we are so far ahead of them now. And, with the winter looming ahead of us, nothing can be done until the meeting at Fort William next year, at which time a decision will be made."

"Next year could be too late," Luc replied bluntly.

Jamieson smiled at Keira, who had been listening to all this intently. "Well," he said, "enough of this depressing talk! How can we be so glum in the company of such a radiant woman? Come on, Keira, lass, cheer us up with a song."

They sang some old Scottish favorites and a few French songs as well. Luc always smiled at Keira's atrocious French accent. Jamieson drank a lot of brandy that night and even danced Keira around the room a time or two, whirling her wildly to make her laugh. Then they exchanged funny stories, and the

mood of the evening ended on a lively note, which Jamieson graciously attributed to Keira's "bonny sparkle." With a disparaging wave at Luc, who sat smiling at them, the older man kidded, "What's a lovely Scottish lass doing with a Frenchman?" And lapsing into broad Scots, "We a' ken whit *they* are like: rogues and reprobates. Come awa over to Fort Chipewyan, Keira, hen. There's several hundred eager lads ower there more than willing tae treat ye like a princess. Heavens above, they are a' sick wi' love for ye!"

"That I can well understand!" Luc chuckled, his dark eyes moving over her flushed face and down to her bosom-and he suddenly wished that Jamieson would finish his drink and go to bed, freeing them to go to theirs. He was mildly surprised that Keira's beauty and vivacity could still exert such a powerful response in him, even after all this time, and was the first to admit that he was a very lucky man. But . . . he thought she seemed a little giddy and frantic that night under her lively banter. He sensed a brittle, forced quality to her laughter, and

her eyes seemed overbright, almost feverish.

In two days they would be leaving for Montreal, and Luc wondered if Keira could be apprehensive about the long journey ahead of them, aware, as he was, that it wasn't only unfriendly Indians they had to worry about along the way, but men of their own kind. With the trade war raging in the Northwest, not a week went by without them hearing about some ambush or atrocity, and the North West Company were as guilty of this as their rival, both sides all too inclined to act first and think later, the result being that many neutrals were hurt or even killed.

Luc was relieved when their overnight guest finally decided it was time to go to bed, and he was irritated when he heard Keira suggest that Jamieson have a

nightcap first. He caught her eyes and very slightly shook his head, but Keira ignored him and jumped up to go to the sideboard where the drinks were kept. Another half-hour passed before they were able to go to their bedroom.

The instant Jamieson left them Keira's ebullient mood evaporated. She spoke not a word to Luc as they climbed the stairs; she didn't as much as glance at him and pulled away when he tried to give her a quick kiss en route to their room. Once there, she turned her back on him and undressed in silence. As he removed his own things it occurred to Luc that she had been edgy and peevish quite a bit of late, often snapping at him for no good reason that he could see. Suddenly an incredible thought struck him, one that filled him with delight. He dropped his boots and went to her and turned her to face him, his eyes bright.

"Keira," he said, his voice not quite steady, "are you pregnant?"

She gave a little start, then replied harshly, "No, thank God!"

He was terribly hurt. Luc felt as if she had kicked him in the face and all the joy went out of him. He regarded her soberly. "Is there something troubling you, darling? You haven't been yourself lately."

There was a moment when she hesitated. He looked so concerned, so worried, his eyes resting on her with such tenderness that Keira felt the new hardness inside her begin to crack as it had always done at one loving glance from those dark brown eyes! "What are your plans when we reach Montreal?" she asked abruptly. "I think I have the right

to know."

"Plans . . . ?" He stared at her, frowning, stung by her brusque tone of voice, the coldness in her eyes, the way she stood rigid in his embrace. They might have been enemies rather than lovers the way Keira was glaring at him.

Then she burst out, "What are your plans for *us*?"

Instantly Keira felt a change in him. All his features tightened and his eyes became remote. The warm hands on her arms fell away and now she was standing slightly apart from him, not touching. Watching him, all her dreams came crashing down about her head and her worst fears were realized, and for a moment Keira thought she would swoon, or be sick, or choke to death at the clutching anguish tightening her throat so that she could hardly breathe. Then, maddened with pain and without waiting for his response, she screamed at him, "You . . . knave! Oh, God, why did I ever think I could trust you?"

"Keira, for God's sake!"

When Luc tried to take her in his arms again she jumped back, her eyes blazing in her pale face. "Don't touch me! Never touch me again. I should have listened to Freddy Astor. He warned me that you would ruin me, and he was right."

Luc strode to her and seized her roughly, wrenching her against him, his eyes burning down into her white face. "Calm yourself and tell me what this is all about. How have I ruined you? I love you, woman"

"Love!" Her lips curled contemptuously. "You know nothing about love, Luc Duval." Desperate to wound him as much as he had done her, Keira cried, "You are a rapacious animal!" and had the satisfaction of seeing him wince. "I was innocent when I fell into your clutches. I was aa virgin. And look at me now, living like this. And you wonder how you've ruined me!"

Luc went very quiet and still. He stared down at her as he might have gazed at a stranger. And in fact Keira seemed like a stranger to him at that moment with her face distorted with fury, hurt, and boiling indignation. Until recently she had given every indication of being blissfully happy with him, and Luc realized now

that it had lulled him into a state of complacency since each seemed perfectly content with each otherhe certainly was!

"Will you tell me what's wrong?" he asked her quietly, but he already knew. She wanted . . . marriage.

"I know about Clarise Menard," Keira replied, startling him.

And there it was, an announcement Luc hoped never to hear. All along he had wanted to spare Keira that knowledge. No wonder, he groaned, that she had heaped abuse on him.

"I never expected anything like this from Jasper Rawson," Luc said bitterly.

She tossed her head. "Jasper didn't tell me. François did. I've known about the Frenchwoman from the day I left Fort Williambut like a fool I didn't believe it." She took a deep, unsteady breath. "It's true, isn't it?"

"Yes," Luc admitted, "but you don't understand."

"Oh yes," she, contradicted, "I understand perfectly. I understand that you've deceived me all along with this woman. That's all I need to know."

Keira jerked free of him then and walked across the room to the window. Everything on the other side of the glass was a blur as she struggled to hold back tears and keep the remnants of her pride gathered about her. It was all she had left now.

"Naturally, I won't be coming back here," she told him dully. "I have no intention of continuing to live like this. But"she swallowed"there is something you have that belongs to me. My bond. It's the last thing I want from you."

With a groan Luc crossed the room to where Keira stood so stiffly by the window and, ignoring her frigid posture, pulled her back into his arms and held her there, his mouth seeking and finding hers though she

tried to turn away. Then, quite suddenly, she stopped fighting himbut somehow that was even worse. She stood like a dead person in his embrace and her lips were totally cold under his. Picking her up, Luc carried her to the bed and they lay down side by side, Keira with her

head turned away. He caught her chin and made her look at him. "If you will listen I can explain everything," he told her softly, his look tender, coaxing.

Keira closed her eyes, afraid that that loving light in his eyes would sway her.

"You would be wasting your breath," she said. "I could never believe anything you said to me now."

"Keira"he drew her close"it's *you* I love. Do you think I could put another woman in place of my dearest love? Do you think I could ever part from her? Surely, after all our time together, you know me better than that?"

There was no answer.

"Open your eyes," he whispered. "Look at me."

"I have no desire to look at you."

She couldn't bear it, couldn't stand to hear another lying word, tormented as she was by the thought that all along, while Luc made love to her and whispered endearments into her gullible ears made her pregnant with a child who, had it lived, would have been a bastard that during all that time Luc had been engaged to marry Clarise Menard!

This man, Keira thought bitterly, had bound her to him through buying her bond, then had dragged her into the wilds with him, exposing her to constant danger and the ever-present threat of a violent death, and finally degrading her by making her his "country wife" with the intention of keeping his *legal* wife in style at the mansion' he proposed to build in Montreal. After all that, Luc Duval expected her to believe what he said now! It was only one more example of how he

underestimated her and held her in low esteem.

Suddenly Keira pulled her hand free and slapped his face.

When Luc jerked back, Keira jumped off the bed and spun to face him, suddenly knowing how she could get her revenge and at the same time save her pride.

"Remember when I disappeared from Fort William? I *wasn't* abducted," she rushed on without waiting for him to respond. "I left willingly. You see, Freddy Astor and I planned to be married. We were madly in love."

Luc sprang to his feet.

"You are lying!" he said.

"No." Keira shook her head, and gave the knife another twist by laughing mockingly. "Our plans were ruined when we were ambushed by the people from Hudson's Bay. They refused to conduct the ceremony at York Factory since we were prisoners, so"she shrugged"Freddy and I had to content ourselves by being lovers."

The room became deathly quiet. All the air seemed to go out of it; all the warmth and vitality. Keira watched the tall, broad-shouldered man standing ten feet away from her turn to stone, so hard and still did he seem. She saw the brown eyes darken to black, his mouth become a cruel slash in his tanned face, the expression in that face murderous.

"You are lying!" Luc's voice was thunderous.

Keira shook her head, but suddenly she was frightened.

He stared at her, nothing loving in the way he gazed at her now. Freddy Astor! Luc thought, the foolish, besotted pup, the idiot who had kept badgering Keira to marry him, though they hardly knew each other. He remembered her remarking that Astor was such a gentleman, and so madly in love with her; that he was

from a rich family! Luc also recalled his own fierce jealousy at the time, then later, once he finally found Keira at Helsingor, his skepticism about the story she related to explain her abduction. And there was one other thing. Keira had been almost hysterical when they left Helsingor without finding Astor and had brought his name up frequently immediately afterwards until she noticed how much it annoyed him, then she had stopped. Freddy Astor! He couldn't believe it. And heLuchad felt bad about deceiving Keira over Clarise Menard!

Devastated, then furiously angry at the thought of Keira and Astor locked in each other's arms while he, like a fool, had spent nine months of his lifenine months away from his business!combing thousands of miles of wilderness to find her, Luc was almost driven insane with rage. He started across the room towards her, not seeing

the Keira he loved now but only an object he despised, one who had duped him, almost destroyed him during the time he searched to find her, and finally, had broken his heart.

Keira was sure Luc intended to kill her. As he advanced she backed away until her back came up against the door. She knew it was locked, and he had the key! Then she acted by instinct, raising her hands, palms up, in a gesture of entreaty, and their eyes met.

Luc stopped. His face was a ruthless mask that Keira hardly recognized.

"I have something to give you," he said, his voice flat, emotionless. "You might need it in Montreal to prove that you are free to seek other employment."

He went to a chest at the other side of the room and lifted out a metal box in which he kept all his private papers. Keira, still rooted to the spot by the door, watched him unlock it and take out a document, and it was like being in the throes of a nightmare. She felt frozen, helpless, transfixed. Let this not be happening!

she moaned inwardly. Please, *please* let me wake up to find this has all been a bad dream! Through a dark haze she saw Luc walking back to her with the paper in his hand. His expression hadn't changed. His eyes held no warmth at all as he looked at her. She might have been a stranger.

Then he all but threw her bond in her face.

Two days later they left for Montreal, where it had begun, and where, Keira knew, it was destined to end.

29

They almost never reached Montreal.

Near the Saskatchewan River, where the land was dry after the long, hot summer, with no rain for months and the soil reduced to dust, they were harassed by a band of Assiniboine Indians under a belligerent young chief. During their first encounter the chief complained about the white man selling his people what he called "poisoned" liquor, also that the pale ones often stole their women and turned them into slaves, and shot too many buffalo, subsequently

driving them away from the Indians' area. While the parley was going on, everything duly translated by Takona, Luc noticed the Indians casting covetous eyes at their canoes and provisions. There were about forty Indians, a third of them squaws and papooses, so Luc thought it was unlikely they would attack.

"Ask them what they want," he instructed Takona.

What they wanted were guns and liquor, but instead Luc sent them away with food, cloth, beads, and

knives, which he could see didn't really suit the chief. From then on Luc's brigade was sniped at on its journey down the Saskatchewan. The area they were passing through was parched, a combination of flat prairie and rugged tableland of sandstone plateaus, with deep canyons in between. Here the river they were navigating was quite narrow, no wider than fifty feet in places. Sometimes level plains sweeping away on either side offered views for miles into the distance. In other places the river was hemmed in by jagged cliffs.

It was still extremely hot in the region during the day, though the nights were cool. Luc knew that the daytime temperature could plunge at any moment and they would have to don their fur-lined leather garments. He wanted to get as quickly along the route as possible before the weather broke, and he was particularly anxious to move out of the land of the Assiniboinés, especially since Keira was with him.

They had hardly spoken to each other since they left Fort Arrowhead, and then only when absolutely necessary. Luc couldn't bear even to look at her now. Each time he did he would have a dark mental picture of Keira in Fred Astor's arms, and murderous rage would boil up inside him afresh. He recognized that he had deceived Keira by keeping silent about his engagement but Clarise had entered his life long before he met Keira, while Freddy Astor had entered *hers* at the time of their own love affair, and that made a crucial difference as far as Luc was concerned.

Constantly on guard against an attack from the Assiniboinés, Luc paid close attention to where they camped at night; even during the day he was vigilant, and cursed the narrow stretch of river they were passing through. In their canoes they made easy targets as they rode east, and one afternoon a voyageur was struck by an arrow. The man wasn't serious-

ly hurt, though he was losing a lot of blood. Dr. Cabot suggested they halt for the day to give the voyageur's wound a chance to congeal, and Luc cast about for a spot that would afford them some sort of protection.

They came to a place where the land was flat on one side and towering cliffs rose on the other, with ledges and caverns cut into the cliffs by the pounding of the elements over millions of years. From high above, a waterfall tumbled down past niches and terracing in the rocks, thundering into the water below.

"Pull in there," he ordered Maurice, pointing to the massive boulders, with the intention of hiding Keira in one of the caves overnight.

The second he spied a foothold in the rocks, Luc jumped out of the lead canoe, then reached back and lifted Keira onto the narrow ledge beside him.

"Grab hold of my belt," he said, "and for God's sake, don't let go."

Then he began to climb, pulling her up behind him, often slipping and sliding on the wet surfaces, drenched by spray from the waterfall. Moving from one steplike perch to another, they made their way upward, higher and higher over the river sparkling in the sunshine below. Keira was terrified; she was afraid to look down, and didn't, her knuckles white as she gripped Luc's belt, her heart vaulting up into her mouth each time he slipped a little. They passed a few niches in the rocks on the way, but none of them were deep enough to suit Duval. Finally, easing along the cliff face until they were under the surging overflow of the falls, he spied a cave that was much deeper, therefore safer.

He dragged her inside where it was cool and dim. The damp air felt frigid after the stifling heat outside and Keira shivered, hugging herself. They were both breathless and perspiring heavily from the exertion of the climb, and soaked to the skin, their clothes

sticking to their bodies, drenched by the water.

They faced each other in the gloom. Her eyes were soft, luminous as silver in the semidarkness. His, Keira saw, were dark and compelling; they drew her powerfully and she took a step forward without thinking, then stopped, shivering again but for another reason. Inside the cavern it was hushed and cool, the only sound the thundering of the water over the precipice outside, a thundering echoing in her

blood, pounding in her ears. Keira felt her limbs go weak, her mouth dry.

Luc made as if to turn away, to go back to his men, then suddenly wheeled back and seized Keira roughly and wrenched her against him, stared down into her eyes with a look of arrogant determination, then ravaged her mouth with a savage kiss that left her lips swollen and bruised. Catching the neck of her gown in both hands, Luc ripped it open and her breasts spilled free. He cupped them, squeezed them, rubbed his stubbly cheek against them and nipped and bit at her nipples while his burning hands roved up under her gown, the long tanned fingers closing cruelly over her buttocks. Lifting her, he crushed her against his hardness, grinding himself into her, butting her hard against the wall with each thrust while hot, bruising kisses showered her eyes, ears, and throat, her breasts and nipples, leaving a trail of inflamed flesh in their wake.

Luc heard her sharp cry of surprise and protest, but ignored it as he bore her down to the damp ground and impatiently dragged her gown off her body. She had called him a rapacious animal, had she not? Well, he would show her exactly what such a creature could do. He thrust her legs wide apart with his knees and with his hands at her hips jerked Keira up to his waiting hardness, watching her face as he plunged inside her and how that face changed! As Luc rose

and fell above her the resentful frown at his harsh treatment disappeared, replaced by a slumberous look of pleasure, then gradually, the strain; the frantic reaching for that heady pinnacle. Her lips parted in a choked cry. Swiftly Luc bent forward and kissed her, his own eyes closing, control slipping away. They clutched each other, shuddering together, burning together in waves of ecstatic fire.

Afterwards Keira slapped his face.

He laughed as he stood up, his eyes scornful, knowing. "Merci," he drawled. "I enjoyed it too."

"Brute!"

"But you *like* brutes. That was obvious a moment ago."

"Get out, you"

They heard a loud shout from beyond the cave. Luc dragged on his breeches and hurried to the entrance, calling down to the men below,

"What is it? What's happening?"

Maurice pointed at the flat prairie land stretching away on the other side of the river. "Smoke," he shouted back.

It wasn't smoke, Luc saw, it was dust, dust stirred up by riders crossing the plain. Fortunately they were still several miles away.

Cursing, he ran back to Keira still lying on the floor and ordered, "Stay here until I come back for you. And if I *don't* come back" he pulled his pistol out of his belt and handed it to her, adding with a catch in his voice, "don't let them take you alive."

Then with his emotions raw, knowing he dare not tarry or allow himself to think what might happen to her, Luc turned away. Keira jumped to her feet and caught up with him at the entrance to the cave, all her anger forgotten, terror and fear for him brimming in her eyes. She caught his arm, but when he glanced at her she could only shake her head, her throat too

choked up to speak.

"Take heart," Luc muttered. "We'll give them a good fight of it."

Then he was gone.

Keira staggered back into the bowels of the cave, tears pouring down her cheeks. "I love you!" she sobbed aloud, her words echoing back at her from the dripping walls, drowned out by the roaring of the falls. He might die, she thought frantically, without knowing how much she still loved him.

She flew back to the entrance and, heedless of the consequences, shouted down, "Luc! Luc, darling, I love you with all my heart. Oh . . . Luc . . ."

He couldn't hear her words, but when Luc saw her at the mouth of the cave he signaled frantically to her to get back out of sight. Then he ordered his men to the other side of the river, afraid that if they were stationed near where Keira was hiding the Indians would assume that they were guarding her. Then, if the battle went against him, all the Assiniboines need do was search the cliff face until they found her. The thought of it nearly drove him mad.

If things went wrong, both Luc and his men knew that they would not

allow themselves to be captured alive. Sudden death, self-inflicted, was vastly preferable to a lingering death of hellish torture at the hands of the Indians. They quickly hauled up the canoes on the flat side of the river to form a barricade, then, guns primed and ready, threw themselves down behind them, with the three youngest voyageurs given charge of keeping all the spare weapons loaded. In this they had an advantage over the Assiniboinés. The Indians had very few guns, Luc had noticed when the chief and his party had confronted them demanding weapons, which he had naturally refused to give them, even while aware that not all white men were as scrupulous, especially when it was to their gain.

With the river at their backs and the endless prairie in front of them, Luc and his men waited tensely behind the upturned canoes. They could hear thundering hoofbeats now and the whoops and howls of the Assiniboinés. Then the first arrows began to fly, hissing through the late afternoon sunshine like air-borne snakes.

The turf directly in front of the canoes exploded in a cloud of dust, turning the bright day into premature twilight. Gunfire erupted in blazing flashes of light and a smell like sulphur filled the air, mingling with the odor of dust and sweat and horseflesh as the Indians' wild-eyed ponies danced and reared in front of them. Savages in garish war paint, beads, and feathers pranced about shrieking and bellowing at the top of their lungs, lying low over the sides of their horses as they fired off their arrows, and in some cases, guns, directly into the canoes and the men crouched behind them. The brigade fired back, their weapons roaring, bucking in their sweating hands, jolting back against their bare shoulders. From the corner of his eye Luc saw two of his voyageurs fall back, their rifles tumbling from their hands, blood spattering over the dust that coated their skin. But neither did the Assiniboinés go unscathed. Several were blasted out of the saddle and promptly pounded into the ground by the other riders.

For several harrowing minutes mayhem reigned, then suddenly the war party spun about and went galloping away across the prairie. An eerie hush descended over the brigade. Ghostly clouds of dust filtered back to earth, covering the bodies of the Indians they could now see scattered about the plain in front of them.

None of the experienced men in Luc's group moved from their positions, except to pick up fresh weapons, but one of the young voyageurs, the lad who had been

hired to replace François, jumped up from where he had been helping to load the weapons and with a triumphant laugh ran out into the open to gaze scornfully after the departing band. "Well," he said, "that didn't take long."

"Get down!" Luc yelled to him, but too late. One of the "bodies" lying seemingly dead on the dry earth suddenly came back to life and with a demented shriek of fury pounced on young Michel, scalping knife in hand. The youth staggered back, bleeding, as the Indian set about him with the knife, hacking at his head and shoulders. Swearing, Luc got to his feet, and slapping away the many hands that clutched at him to drag him back, he vaulted over the canoe and raced to the boy's aid. Several hundred yards out on the prairie the war party wheeled around as Luc and his crew knew they would and came galloping back to make a fresh attack. Michel was on the ground, the Indian bending over him, his back to Luc. As the redskin went to scalp the boy, Luc brought the butt of his rifle crashing down on the back of his head, sending the Assiniboine tumbling headlong into the dust.

The air resounded with frenzied war cries and pounding hoofbeats. Arrows whizzed past Luc's head as he ran back to the canoes with a limp Michel in his arms. His men saw his body jolt as a bullet struck him at close range, and, breaking their own rule, several flew out to help him as the boy tumbled from his grasp and the first of the riders pelted up behind them, led by the young chief on his white pony, conspicuous in his full feathered headdress. Stumbling a little, a numbing pain spreading across his shoulders, Luc raised his head to the cliff-top cave where he had concealed Keira, and he felt a deadly fear for her. The Assiniboine party was bigger than he'd first thought, and their chief, Luc sensed, was out to prove himself and wouldn't give up until either his prey or he fell.

As Maurice and Henri made to grab his arms to help him get back behind the barricade, Luc suddenly wrenched the rifle out of Henri's hand, dropped to his knee, and allowed the chief to come within eight feet of him. He saw the young Assiniboine smile triumphantly, a smile Luc was to remember ever afterwards, and felt the sting of his arrow pierce his thigh. Then, as the savage loomed over him with tomahawk raised high, Luc shot him out of the saddle.

He had no recollection afterwards of his men dragging him back to the canoes, or of the Indian braves scooping up their leader and tossing him over the back of his horse. He didn't hear them galloping away or his own crew scrambling to get the canoes back into the water while

Maurice scaled the cliff for Keira. Nor did he feel her cradling his head on her lap, feel her anguished kisses or hear the soft, broken words she spoke to him. Luc lapsed into unconsciousness and sank into a coma as his men paddled frantically down the river and continued paddling on through the night, hazardous as it was, more concerned about the hazard on the nearby plains.

A full day went by before they dared stop long enough for Dr. Cabot to extract the bullet from Luc's shoulder and attend to the arrow wound on his thigh. By this time infection had set in, and for a week they battled to save Luc's life, Keira refusing to rest lest he slip away while she was asleep, obsessed with the notion that if she watched him constantly and kept talking to him he wouldn't leave her. By the time he finally regained consciousness, Keira herself was ready to drop. "You rest now," Dr. Cabot ordered. "I'll attend him."

There was a certain amount of thawing between Luc and Keira after that. For the rest of the trip they were pleasantly polite to each other, but with the crisis over, the old doubts and resentments returned to

loom between them like a dark gulf, and neither could bring themselves to make the first move to bridge it.

Luc soon learned from Maurice and the others how carefully and unstintingly Keira had taken care of him while he'd been ill, but as he reasoned, it was to her advantage to see him live, at least until they reached Montreal. There were times when Luc was disgusted with his uncharitable thoughts, but when he felt himself soften he had only to remind himself of how Keira had betrayed him with Astor. He had only to think of that long, anguished search for her through the wilderness and all it had cost him and he wasn't thinking about money to cause his heart to harden afresh.

The facts were simple. He could never trust Keira again. And without trust a future together was impossible.

As the miles fell away behind them, Keira's inner turmoil increased. She could hardly eat, hardly sleep as she contemplated the final parting from Luc. She had no idea what she would do afterwards and was too dejected at the prospect to care, and much as she scolded herself, telling herself that she had to be strong, reminding herself that he had deceived her, used her, needlessly exposed her to danger, it made no difference. She was devastated at the thought of losing him, of never seeing him again.

The day came when they made their final camp at Lachine. By this time Keira had become silent and withdrawn, scarcely able even to speak to the voyageurs without tears filling her eyes. That evening after supper Luc came to her and told her that she was quite at liberty to remain in the Imperial Hotel, where they would be staying in Montreal, until she had "made her plans." His manner was cool and detached, his voice carefully bland as he sought to control his own

seething emotions.

Then he reached for her hand.

Keira's heart gave a great lurch of hope until she realized what he was doing.

Luc pushed a wad of notes into her hand, saying, "For your, ah . . . services to me during the past two years."

Keira's face blazed with mottled color. Hope plummeted inside her. For a second she thought she would be sick. Then she threw the bills back in his face, gasping, "How dare you! What do you"

"You misunderstand," he cut in quickly. "I didn't mean it the way it sounded. My men are paid for the work they do for me, and you've worked just as hard, so you've earned the money. Besides, you'll need it"

"I don't want it!" she choked, and suddenly went very pale.

"Keira . . ."

She turned and ran into her tent, jerking the flap closed behind her.

The next day, the third of December, they arrived in Montreal to find several inches of snow on the ground and the city preparing for Christmas.

In the two and a half years they had been away a great change had been wrought in the town, some of the plans that had been under way before they left now fully accomplished. Mainly thanks to the industry and wealth of the daring men of the North West Fur Company, many of whom had entered politics and local government, plowing their profits and energies into the fledgling city, the place had been greatly improved and much of its former chaos brought to order.

Montreal was now a humming commercial center and growing rapidly all the time. Much of the rubble

and dirt that had clogged the streets had been cleared away and now there were fine new buildings and gracious homes, particularly in the Mount Royal district. The citizens were rightly proud of their university, McGill, and the bustling Bank of Montreal, the new art gallery and theater. An organized police force was bringing law and order to what had recently been an open city, and vigorously driving out the criminal element.

Even the Imperial Hotel looked different. It had been given a face-lift, and a large extension had been added to it. The new manager, Keira noticed, was suave and snooty and cast a dubious eye on the voyageurs, even though they had taken pains to bathe and shave and changed into their "city" attire before they left Lachine. When Luc remarked on the changes since they had last stayed at the hotel, the manager snobbishly informed him that the Imperial was now considered to be on a par with the Grand, and was patronized by wealthy tycoons and businessmen, foreign dignitaries, and even nobility. "In fact," he said, "we have some members of the Scottish aristocracy staying with us at present. I understand that they are here to discuss projected changes in the management of Rupert's Land."

Rupert's Land was a name used to describe the vast territory owned by the Hudson's Bay Company in honor of Prince Rupert, the first Governor of the company and cousin of King Charles II.

At this news Luc and his voyageurs exchanged a glance and Keira recalled that terrible evening when Jamieson had come to visit them in Fort Arrowhead with a startling piece of information about a certain Lord Selkirk and how he was hoping for a land grant from the Hudson's Bay Company. She wondered if the Scottish earl himself could be staying in the hotel.

Keira didn't get her old room back but she was

shown into one quite near it, her luggage carried in by two young porters. Gazing at it, she was reminded of the last time she had come to this hotel, as a half-starved, penniless, bereft young girl straight from the Highlands of Scotland, her only possessions the rags on her back. Now she owned a bulging wardrobe of beautiful clothes, a diamond ring set in gold, a rare arctic fox fur, a silver brush and comb, books, scent, and toilet articles such as only the rich could

afford. The porters groaned under the weight of her material possessions.

But she was still bereft, or soon would be!

Jasper Rawson was in Montreal with them to conclude the season's business with his employer, and, busy as he was with Luc, he still found time to devote to Keira. And Jasper refused to allow her to brood.

When she refused to eat her meals with Luc and Rawson in the hotel dining room and announced that she would dine in her room, Jasper wouldn't hear of it. Not caring whether Duval approved or not, he took Keira out for dinner to Richard Dillon's grand establishment the following evening, and the day after that they took her revised manuscript, which they had labored over during the trip back, to Frobisher & MacMillan's Publishing Company, where Rawson knew one of the editors. The man promised to read it just as soon as time allowed.

Over coffee later the normally brisk Jasper reached for Keira's hand and admitted softly though they had never discussed her troubles with Luc that he understood what she was going through. "You must not buckle under," he told her feelingly. "I know you are strong enough to rise above this misfortune. Yes, and I want you to know that I am here to help you."

For a minute Keira was embarrassed and turned her head away, her pride raw and jumping, her heart sore.

But Jasper *had* been a good and loyal friend and she knew that he cared for her deeply, and at that moment she desperately needed someone to confide in. "I think I'm going to have his child!" she blurted, her mouth working as she fought back tears.

There was a shocked silence. Jasper looked as if he'd been struck.

"You must tell him," he whispered. "You"

"No!" Keira shook her head emphatically, her fingers tightening on his. "God, no! Luc has made it clear that he doesn't want me, and I won't try to force him into marriage because of this . . . because it would never work, Jasper. He would always resent it." She bit her lip, blinking away tears, and went on unconvincingly, struggling to hide the hopelessness inside her, "I'll think of something . . ."

"You must marry me."

Keira stared at Rawson open-mouthed. When she started to shake her head, he held up a hand. "Wait. Please hear me out." Suddenly he was excited, his sallow skin flushed with color, and a shine came into his eyes. "We get on very well together, do we not?" She nodded and he rushed on, "Yes, and we work very well together too and share many interests. I am not a rich man like Duval," he admitted, "but neither am I poor, and I could give you a very comfortable life. And Keira"he leaned forward, his eyes holding hers"I do love you very dearly and would also love the child."

Keira dropped her eyes to the white tablecloth, her head swimming. Jasper loved her. She supposed, on thinking it over, that she had known it for a long time. Yes, and she was very fond of him too and they did get on famously, treating each other with mutual affection and respect. Countless people went into marriage with much less. It could . . . work. Other than Luc himself there was no one else she'd rather marry.

Jasper was a dear, sweet man, but . . .

"I'm not in love with you," Keira told him, determined to be bluntly honest at the risk of hurting him, "though I'm fonder of you than any other man I've ever known. But fondness isn't enough, Jasper. You deserve so much more than that." She smiled at him wistfully, then suddenly burst out, "Oh, why couldn't I have fallen in love with *you* instead of Luc Duval?" She sighed. "But since I didn't, no, I cannot marry you, dear Jasper, though I thank you for the offer from the bottom of my heart."

"Nonsense! Of course you can marry me." Rawson was brisk once more as he set about trying to make Keira change her mind. "Only fools base marriage on romantic feelings, which are surely the most fleeting emotions in this world. Wise people have more sense than that. And Keira"he leaned forward intently"you must try hard to be sensible now. There is absolutely no way that you could raise a child on your own, especially in this country. You have no money, no family, and when we leave, no friends to help you. Think of your innocent child!" he urged. "Would you raise him in abject poverty and have him stigmatized as a bastard?"

Keira flinched and turned pale at the thought. She recognized that every word that Jasper had spoken was true. She *did* have to put her

baby's welfare and future above that of her own. And if Jasper wanted her . . .

"II" Her emotions were in chaos.

"Say yes and I can find a preacher who will marry us within the hour."

Suddenly she felt dizzy and faint, her eyes moving in slow circles around the cafe. Marry within the hour? Marry . . . Jasper . . .

"Keira, are you all right?" Rawson asked her sharply, alarmed at her sudden pallor, angry at himself for

putting so much pressure on her all at once. "Look," he said, "think it over tonight and give me your answer in the morning. Come on." He rose from his chair and walked around the table to pull hers back. "I think you need to rest now. I'll take you back to the hotel."

Rawson left Keira outside the Imperial, saying that he had business to attend to in town. He was, in fact, going off in search of a preacher so that everything would be ready on the following day, assuming that Keira's answer would be the one he hoped for.

When Keira walked through the hotel foyer a clerk motioned to her from the desk, a letter in his hand. "I wonder if you would mind giving this to Monsieur Duval?" he said, passing it over to her.

Keira gazed down at the envelope. It was postmarked Paris. At the sight of it a fierce and unbridled rage boiled up inside her, and without stopping to think she marched angrily down the corridor to Luc's room.

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When Luc opened the door Keira all but threw the letter at him.

"From your fiancée," she said, her voice dripping sarcasm. "No doubt she is anxious to know when you intend to make an honest woman out of her, though how a lying man can accomplish that feat"

His arm shot out and pulled her into the room, kicking the door closed behind her.

"If we *must* have a scene," Luc growled, "we can do it in private."

"Oh, I have no intention of causing a scene," Keira informed him icily, even while struggling to control her emotions. "I simply came here to deliver that letter as the desk clerk asked me to do."

"Merci," he said, and tossed it on top of a bureau.

They looked at each other. Keira's face was scarlet, her gray eyes bright with anger, but still she seemed very beautiful to the man watching her, her breasts rising and falling under her labored breathing, her

figure slim and elegant in her cream wool gown, the matching cape carried over her arm. It suddenly struck Luc how different she was now from the day he had first brought her to the Imperial Hotel; how much she had matured in the interval, filled out, her beauty now nearing its peak, radiant and bewitching. As he looked at her, it was hard for him to understand how Keira, who had once railed against the betrayal of her clan chief, could herself have been so disloyal and deceitful to him, Luc, in the arms of Freddy Astor.

Keira saw his expression harden. It was as if he had slapped her face. It was not so long ago, she remembered, when those dark brown eyes had once melted at the sight of her. Luc was dressed to go out, she noticed, and a handsome gentleman he was in his black city clothes, the jacket emphasizing his wide shoulders and the vest the breadth of his chest, his stock snowy white against the healthy glow of his olive complexion. And why *shouldn't* it glow? she thought wrathfully. He had everything he wanted and would soon marry the woman he had chosen over her the one who would bear his first child!

But . . . though she had come to scream abuse at him, Keira suddenly decided against it. No, she would not give Luc the satisfaction of knowing how jealous and utterly miserable she was. She tossed her head with an air of indifference and took a step to the door. "Well, I'm sure you must be very eager to read your letter," she said. "By the way, when is the marriage to take place?" She had meant to sound only casually polite and was mortified when her voice shook badly. Turning away, she hurried to the door, tears pricking her eyes.

"There will be no marriage."

Keira stopped abruptly, his statement loud in her ears. "What . . . ?" Slowly, her heart racing, she turned to face him.

"I'm not getting married." He didn't elaborate.

Luc walked to a small desk in his room and picked up a leather folder, then strode towards Keira hovering near the door, her face alive with curiosity, naked hope in her eyes. But ignoring her questioning look, he opened the door and waved her out, saying, "I have a meeting in half an hour, so if you will excuse me . . ." His tone was cool and remote.

He left the room without bothering to open the letter from Clarise Menard.

In her own room Keira paced the floor in a welter of indecision, Luc's abrupt announcement echoing and re-echoing in her mind. He was not going to marry the Frenchwoman!

A short time ago this news would have had Keira dancing for joy, shouting her relief to the world. Now she had nothing to celebrate. Luc no longer loved her. She had read that plainly in his eyes, in his cold, aloof manner. And she had killed that love herself, Keira knew, the day she lied to him about Freddy Astor. Now, no matter what she said and did or how hard she tried to make things right, he would never believe her and never trust her again. After all this time she knew Luc Duval well, and once his mind was made up about something or someone nothing could change it.

Oh, dear God, what a fool she had been! The revenge that should have been so sweet was now as sour as bitter poison on her lips, Keira thought distractedly, wondering at the same time what had changed Luc's mind about getting married. Of course, she mused, if he had been really keen on Clarise Menard, *really* madly in love with her, would he not have wed her long since? The very fact that he had delayed it for years was significant and should have told *her* something!

And she had to come to a decision about Jasper Rawson by morning. No! she thought, shaking her head firmly, I absolutely cannot marry Jasper. But a moment later, as she ranged back and forth like a trapped animal from one side of the room to the other, Keira was reminded of the child she was carrying and knew she should be considering what was best for it. Why should the baby have to pay for *her* mistake? Just because she had botched up her life didn't mean that the baby should suffer by starting life at a disadvantage. Jasper knew how she felt about him and still wanted her, and if she did decide to

marry him, she would do everything in her power to make him a good wife.

"Oh, Lord," Keira moaned aloud, tugging at her hair, "what am I going to do?"

Luc's voyageurs had no trouble in deciding what *they* were going to do. Their routine whenever they returned from le pays d'en haut was always the same. With their pay burning a hole in their pockets they went out to enjoy all the attractions the city of Montreal had to offer; drinking, wenching, gambling, and, of course, fighting until the money ran out. While Luc and the other traders headed for their favorite meeting place, the Beaver Club, the voyageurs' first stop was usually the River Inn off St. Paul Street. Here canoeists from many brigades met to drink and exchange the latest gossip.

When Maurice, Henri, and the others went to the inn the first evening they were in town, the place was packed and the noise deafening. Once their eyes had adjusted to the smoky atmosphere, the faces of old friends jumped out at them from the crowd, and Luc's men settled down to enjoy themselves, many wondering why they had ever decided to become voyageurs, dooming themselves to spend so many long years in

the wilderness. It was always like this when they first returned home, but by the time several months had passed most were heartily sick of civilization and eager for the freedom and adventure only to be found in the wilds. Some, of course, decided to stay.

In his rounds of the established bars his first two days in Montreal, Maurice kept hearing about a popular new tavern that had opened the previous year, a place run by former voyageurs who had opted out of the fur trade. The third evening he decided to try Shelton's and found it almost as bustling as the River Inn. Pushing his way to the bar, Maurice gave a start of surprise when he recognized a familiar face standing behind it.

"Pour l'amour de Dieu!" he cried, staring. "François?"

François chuckled at his old gouvernail's surprise, well aware that he had changed a lot since Maurice had last seen him. For one thing, his spots were gone. For another, he had grown a moustache, which made him look older. He had burned the clothing he used to wear as a voyageur and now wore smart city suits instead. He was also happily married and the father of a small son he adored.

Leaving someone else to tend the bar, François settled down in a booth to gossip in French with Maurice, and to boast a little about his success. Waving around, he said, "I'm a partner in the business, and as you can see, it's doing very well. The best thing I ever did was to leave the fur trade. That's no life for any man." And with his usual tactlessness, "Look what it's done to you, Maurice. You look twice your actual age."

"Oui," Maurice grinned. "My grandfather could pass for my son."

Next, François was eager to know how his old crew were doing, particularly what had become of Keira

MacKenzie. When he heard that Keira was back with Luc Duval he nodded slowly. "That pair were meant for each other. I tried to put her off him, but"he shrugged"I could see it didn't work, not even when I told her about his woman in Paris."

"Why did you kidnap her at Fort William?" Maurice asked. "What did you stand to gain?"

He had done it, François admitted, to get the job with Freddy Astor. Astor, he went on, had been determined to marry the girl, even if he had to abduct her to do it, but Keira wouldn't have him. "It wasn't long before she detested him as much as the rest of us did," he said, then sobering, "I was a fool in those days! Later, I regretted what I'd done, especially when she miscarried Duval's child while we were at York Factory. I had to get away after that"

Maurice gripped his arm. "Are you sure about that, François; about the child?"

The young man nodded soberly. "She almost died at the time."

Maurice stood up, anxious to get back to the Imperial Hotel to relate this news to Luc, but with a laugh François pulled him back down in his chair. "Drink up, drink up!" he urged. "Don't fly away. Tonight is on me and we are going to celebrate, my friend." He draped an arm around the voyageur's shoulders and went on sentimentally, "I always liked you, Maurice; you were like a father to me. Ah . . . it's so good to see you again, to talk over old times."

When Maurice drained his glass it was immediately refilled, and by midnight he was no longer able to rise from his chair, or even to see. An hour later he passed out and was carried into a back room of

Shelton's bar. Tucking a quilt around him, François remarked to the man who had helped him carry Maurice to bed, "I know him. He'll sleep until noon tomorrow. See that he has a good meal prepared for him then."

The other man nodded, and François went home to his wife and son.

At about the same time, Keira, lying wide awake in bed, finally came to the decision that she would marry Jasper Rawson. "I'll tell him at breakfast," she thought, and sighed.

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Luc left the hotel just after eight o'clock the next morning to have breakfast with McTavish and other North West directors at the Beaver Club. Finally, at long last, they seemed ready to take his advice about trying to buy a controlling interest in the Hudson's Bay Company and none too soon. At that very moment representatives of Lord Selkirk's party were staying at the Imperial Hotel, scheduled to leave at the end of the week for a tour of the Red River territory that Selkirk was so interested in. Luc knew he would have to be at his most persuasive that morning. He did want the North West Company, and all his old friends there, to come out ahead, but at that moment his mind wasn't really on business. Try as he might, he couldn't force his thoughts away from Keira, who at any moment might walk out of his life forever.

Why should he care! Luc railed at himself, angry at himself for wasting time dwelling on a relationship that had brought him so much grief. Ah . . . but for

every moment of grief there had been ten of pleasure, joy that he had never known with another woman, and, he suspected, never would.

When he had finally opened Clarise's letter, Luc supposed he should have been shocked and angry. She had married Jules D'Arly in Switzerland, she wrote. "It was only during my illness that I realized how much he meant to me. He is my right hand, Luc, and I simply cannot cut it off. I do hope you will understand and forgive me."

All he felt was immense relief. And the only thing left to him was business!

From the window of his room Jasper Rawson watched Luc ride away, then he walked downstairs and knocked on Keira's door, his heart in his mouth.

Jasper too had spent a sleepless night belatedly hoping he was doing the right thing. In his thirties, he was much older than Keira and set in his ways; he was exacting, he knew, and compulsively neat and well organized, a perfectionist. And he had a very possessive and demanding mother! His mother, he fretted, would be the biggest drawback to wedded bliss, and Jasper didn't relish presenting his bride to her his *pregnant* bride.

When Keira opened the door to him she looked pale and anxious, with hollow shadows under her eyes. She was dressed in dark clothes, a navy-blue skirt and jacket that emphasized her pallor.

Their eyes met and Keira nodded.

"Wonderful!" he said, and kissed her cheek, then awkwardly took her in his arms and embraced her, murmuring as much to convince himself as Keira, "We'll be happy, you'll see."

He had arranged for them to be married at noon. It was barely nine o'clock now and Jasper suggested they have a leisurely breakfast in the hotel. "It will give us

the chance to make plans . . . for afterwards," he smiled.

The hotel dining room had been extended and redecorated since Keira had last seen it. To avoid contact with Luc, she had taken her meals in her room since they'd been back, except for the times she had gone out to dine with Jasper. She wasn't in the least hungry now and doubted that she'd be able to swallow past the great lump wedged in her throat. But this was her wedding day, and she had no wish to hurt Jasper. "Yes," she said, "that would be nice."

Besides her problems with Luc, the pregnancy often made her feel ill. Every morning now Keira felt queasy and light-headed, and the feeling was stronger than ever that day. As they walked down the hall holding hands, Keira had a sudden chilling sensation that she shouldn't proceed and almost tugged her hand free and ran back to her room. Get a hold of yourself! she scolded. All brides are nervous on their wedding day. For God's sake, think of Jasper.

But as they neared the gracious archway leading into the dining room,

the feeling sharpened. Beyond, Keira could see pastel-tinted walls and the marble columns that had been added; the glitter of crystal and silverware dazzled her eyes. The sea of faces in the room wavered in front of her and the clatter of cutlery against china sounded unnaturally loud; the smell of food made her stomach lurch.

She stopped. "Jasper, I don't think"

"You have to eat something," he told her. "You can't get married on an empty stomach." Then he added with a chuckle, "It might rumble during the ceremony."

A faint smile wobbled across her ashen face.

Rawson's hand tightened on hers. "That's better. Now, come on! If we don't hurry there will be nothing

left. Look at all these people!"

They walked into the dining room.

A waiter hurried forward to lead them to a table by the window set for two, weaving ahead of them between tables, Keira and Jasper following. They had almost reached it, the waiter already pulling back a chair, when a large party of men seated nearby finished their meal and rose, one of them stepping back directly into Keira's path. He swung around and caught her arm, apologizing, "Oh, I'm most dreadfully sorry! Are you all right?"

Keira stared up into the pale blue eyes of Lord Mathew, now the Earl of Strathvagan, part of the team that Lord Selkirk had sent to Canada to study the prospects in the Red River Valley region in western Canada.

She reeled under a chilling shock. He was no longer so lean, Keira saw; his narrow face had filled out. Now he sported a raffish moustache under his long, hooked nose, and altogether seemed older. But . . . there was no mistake. She was looking at the man who had destroyed her family.

Keira opened her mouth to speak, but no words came. She lifted her hand, and as she did so she heard the clash of dirks and claymores ringing in her ears and the anguished cries of her people, felt the chill of the snow and the wind freezing her blood, and smelled the burning.

Strathvagan was frowning at her now. "Madam . . . ?"

"Traitor!" Keira screamed into his startled face. "Traitor!"

Then she fainted.

She was oblivious to the shocked silence that followed. Nor did she hear an embarrassed Lord Mathew exclaim, "The lady, I fear, has mistaken me for somebody else." In truth, he hadn't recognized

Keira, so much had she changed.

In the great fuss that followed she was carried out of the dining room and back to her chamber, where a frantic Jasper leaned over her bed, chafing her icy hands, kissing her cold and clammy cheeks, whispering her name as he held smelling salts under her nose. It took Keira quite some time to come around, and when finally she revived the first thing she whispered was, "Get me out of this hotel! If I see him again I'll kill him."

Then she sobbed brokenly in Rawson's arms.

"Don't worry, dearest," he soothed, "we'll move to a different hotel as soon as you are able." He thought of their wedding plans and went on, "We can stop at the church on the way."

Keira didn't answer.

Luc found one-eyed Henri hovering about the front of the hotel when he returned after eleven o'clock. Waving his boss in the direction of the wing in back where the men were staying, he said, "Maurice finally came back and he's in very bad shape. He wants to see you."

Thinking that something might have happened to his chief voyageur, Luc hurried down to Maurice's room to find it in darkness, the curtains drawn closed across the window. The reek of alcohol made Luc recoil with a grimace, and, thinking the huddle on the bed to be asleep, he started to withdraw when a voice moaned, "Come in, Duval, but for God's sake don't bang the door. My head . . ."

Luc relaxed then and grinned. "Sleep it off. We can talk later"

"No." Maurice turned around and dragged himself up into a sitting position and a sorry sight he was too; even in the dimness Luc could see that his face was badly swollen, with massive bags under his eyes.

"It's about Keira," Maurice began as Luc straddled a chair at his bedside. "I was with François last night."

Luc's smile faded and he leaned forward intently.

Five minutes later Luc was banging on the door of Keira's room just as she and Jasper Rawson were stepping into the carriage he had ordered for them. Luc dashed into the foyer as the coach was pulling away from the hotel on its way to St. Gabriel's Church. "No," the clerk said, shaking his head, "she did not leave a forwarding address. In fact, you just missed them. Miss MacKenzie left a moment ago with Mr. Rawson."

Duval bolted outside, almost colliding with a young porter who was gazing sourly at the small tip that Jasper had given him for helping to carry out Keira's luggage. Luc gripped him by the shoulder, startling the lad and causing him to drop the coin. "What address did these people"he pointed after the departing vehicle"give the coach driver?

"What . . . ?" Luc said, nonplussed when he heard that they were on their way to a church; a *church!* Rawson, he knew, wasn't religious. And it wasn't even Sunday. His grip tightened on the boy's arm, frightening the youth. "You must be mistaken," Luc barked. "Think again."

But the boy shook his head. "I heard them say something about a wedding"

"Bring my horse around," Luc broke in urgently. "And be quick about it."

The porter was even more sour when the tall man galloped away without tipping him at all. Luc knew now what they meant to do, recalling Rawson's affection for Keira, and how close they had become. But she wasn't in love with Jasper Rawson! Luc was certain about that. His accountant and he would kill Rawson if he coaxed Keira into going through with it had taken full advantage of the situation she

was in, though Luc knew, in his heart, that he had no one to blame for that but himself.

He set out after them at a gallop, other traffic and pedestrians careening out of his way, his only concern to reach St. Gabriel's in time to stop the wedding.

"Don't be nervous," Jasper soothed, though he was highly nervous himself. "Everything will be fine, Keira, you've got to believe that."

She tried; she really tried hard, but . . . oh, dear God, she moaned inwardly, what was she about? If it hadn't been for the baby, Keira knew she would open the carriage door this instant and leap out.

As they rattled through the streets she bit her lip and turned her head to the window, her hand clammy-cold as it rested in Jasper's, a dreadful, stifling chunk of ice in her breast. "You are doing the right thing," the cool, logical part of her mind told her. "You can't be selfish and self-centered and think only of yourself. Jasper loves you and you are fond of him, and he will make a good fatherfather"

Keira thought of the *real* father and closed her eyes, pain slicing through her, her heart sinking when she felt the carriage slowing down.

The coach pulled up in front of a small church and Jasper got out, helping Keira to alight. He paid the driver and they started up the short flight of stairs to the front door. Inside the church it was hushed, dim, and cool, so cool that Keira began to shiver violently. The Reverend Nichols was waiting for them with the two witnesses. He was quite taken aback when the prospective bride and groom stopped in front of him, the groom pale and tight-lipped, the bride stricken. They might have been attending a funeral instead of their own wedding, he thought, and it prompted him to enquire, "Do you still wish to proceed?"

Rawson nodded.

But the bride-to-be, with a hand at her head, whispered, "I wonder . . . might I have a glass of water?"

Nichols, gazing at them doubtfully, waved for one of the witnesses to fetch her a drink. There was an awkward pause while they waited for the man to come back. Jasper could see that the minister looked skeptical about the proceedings and might even be thinking of changing his mind about conducting the ceremony, and hastened to explain, "My fiancéethis morning she suffered a great shock, you see. It had nothing to do with our marriage," he hurried on as Nichols frowned and pursed his lips. "But it upset her. So if you could make the ceremony as brief as possible . . ." Rawson felt a surge of relief when he saw the church officer who had agreed to be one of their witnesses hurrying back with the glass of water. Keira's hand shook as

she tipped it up to her lips.

Then the ceremony began, Nichols asking them to join hands, and as Rawson requested he decided to make it brief. After hurrying through the preliminaries, fearing that the woman was about to swoon, he said, "Do you, Jasper Henry Rawson, take this woman, Keira MacKenzie, to be your lawful wedded wife, to love her and keep her in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, until death do you part?"

"I do," Jasper whispered.

Then Nichols turned his attention on Keira. "And do you, Keira MacKenzie, take this man . . ." No! she screamed inwardly. No! Her ears were ringing. The church had become suddenly dark. The face of the minister blurred before her and his voice began to fade, but she *did* hear him say, ". . . until death do you part?"

Then he waited for her response.

Keira opened her mouth. "I . . . I"

All five of them jumped when the big double doors

banged wide behind them and a deep voice roared, "Stop! Stop this at once!"

Keira stumbled against Jasper, clutching at his arm to stop herself from falling, and the minister and the witnesses cried out in protest at the intrusion as a tall, dark man barged down the aisle and plucked the prospective bride away from her groom, shoving Rawson violently aside. "There will be no marriage between this pair!" Luc shouted into the angry face of the minister. "The woman is mine. *Mine!*"

Luc clutched her against his chest so tightly that Keira could hardly breathe, but at the same time a great surge of relief and joy swept over her and the world lit up around her again, sunlight streaming through the tall stained-glass window behind the altar, bathing them in golden radiance. She raised her face to Luc's and their eyes met and held, and in that moment they made their own vows, which, while silent, were deep and binding, uniting them from that moment on.

Then he kissed her, holding her fast against his heart.

Epilogue

Seven months after Luc and Keira were married, the North West Fur Company tried to buy a controlling interest in the Hudson's Bay Company but they were too late. By then Lord Selkirk had his massive land grant, much of it the prime fur country that the North West firm had opened up. Selkirk established a small colony there, populating it with High-landers from Scotland. After years of hardship, it prospered and grew into the great city of Winnipeg.

The protracted battle between the two major fur companies for supremacy finally ended when they amalgamated in 1821, but it was the name of the Hudson's Bay Company that was retained. Gradually the brave and enterprising men of the North West melted away, but the "lords of the lakes and forests," as they were often called, left behind them a lasting legacy for Canada.

Keira dedicated her first book to her lost family in Scotland. Her second the story of the North West Fur Company she dedicated to their oldest son, Gavin.